



GRIND OF WORK

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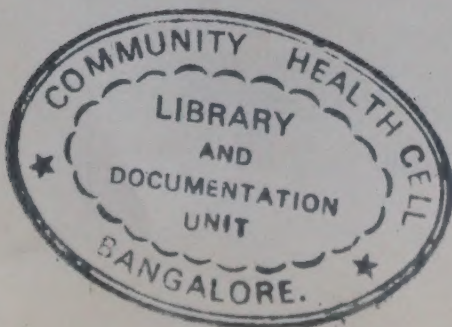
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Preface

The grind of work is put as a curtain raiser to the main Report of the Self Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector - the Report named as 'Shramshakti'.

When the Prime Minister announced the formation of the National Commission on Self Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector, I had no idea that the responsibility would fall on me to carry out its objectives, despite my years of lobbying for such a Commission, in SEWA.

The Commission had decided to tour the country in order to have meetings with women in the 'target group' and to get direct evidence holding public hearings in 18 states of the country.

These tours have been an overwhelming experience for me, to meet and listen to the great women of India working in fields, forests, mines, their homes, or on mountains, roads, shores or in downtown markets. Then I realise that these women are not categories : 'self employeeed' or 'formal-informal sector', they are like the rest of the Indian working population.

These women are indeed great, as I learn that they are better fighters against poverty than their men, have more calculative, stable, forward looking strategies to deal with their own environment. Everywhere in the country, we found that women were the most committed proponents of our future. A concern for the future is strong within them. So the future of the nation lies in the hands of these women. No doubt, they are becoming more aware, the education is spreading amongst them, they are making plans for a better future to enter the 21st century with steadier steps.

However, today, the grind of work is killing them. In Jhilimili village of Bankura, the forest women sang to us that there is no work, (yet) the grind of work is killing me.....', their work is endless, yet invisible.

There is a growing need of women to find work and the enormous problems they face in the labour market. The point to emphasise is the differentially greater load of handicaps they suffer from, high fertility putting restrictions on their mobility, lack of transferable skills, lack of knowledge of markets and techniques and lack of access to assets, capital and tools.

This vulnerability is compounded by the fact that over time, traditional support systems are breaking down. More and more households are becoming assetless which means that not only it is more difficult for women to participate in economic activities but the family unit itself becomes more unstable. As a result, there are more women headed households. Forests and other free sources of consumption items and raw materials become

rarer. Women's low productivity, crude skills face increasing competition in the course of expanding trade.

If we accept that womens' problems are not going to be solved in the course of the current type of development, then we are looking for a political solution - a method of giving additional priority in state policies to measures of helping these women. As past experience has shown, there is little chance of even existing facilities like education, primary health services or access to capital ever reaching these women at sufficient and sustainable levels unless they build up an organised pressure.

However, if totally left to voluntary agencies and the poor women's own efforts, it is unlikely that these kinds of organisations will come up quickly enough and on sufficiently large numbers to make a significant dent on the situation of these women. That is why the National Commission has recommended that the state initiates and maintains a network of grassroot level organisers for women on something like the WDP model of Rajasthan described in the Report. It is rather ironic that one is asking the state to support a machinery which is to promote action for change in state policies !

I do not like the term 'informal' or 'unorganised' to describe the majority of our working population. It sets these people - these women - apart from the rest of the working class as if they are making a living through a method which is either unusual, exotic or a throw-back on some distant past. As shown in the 'Grind of Work', these women are working in the same economic activities - agriculture, forestry, household industry, trade or large scale enterprises like the rest of Indian workers. They are distinct only to the extent that their worker status is more unstable. Their lack of organisation and the resultant vulnerability through absence of political clout is the main factor that needs to be emphasized.

I must state that my experience in SEWA has been a reliable sounding board to understand the minds and language of the women whose account is recorded in this book. I cannot ever thank SEWA enough.

I take this opportunity to sincerely thank the Government of India for setting up such an important Commission to find ways and means to ameliorate the sufferings of the unprotected labouring women. I thank the distinguished members of the Commission Dr. Armaity Desai, Mrinal Pande, Dr. Thamarajakshi, Veena Kohli for their valuable contributions during the tours. I thank the voluntary agencies and government officials in the States for their constant support in arranging public hearings. My very special thanks to my Research Scholar Preeti Bhat for maintaining detailed tour diaries with sensitivity and intelligence.

ELA R. BHATT

GRIND OF WORK

**"THERE IS NO WORK,
YET THE GRIND OF WORKING IS KILLING ME..."**

In the course of travelling to public hearings, meetings with government and project officers, women's organizations, cooperatives, and specified work sites, the members of the Commission often stopped along the roadside whenever they saw women at work, and asked them about their work, their family situation, and the problems they faced in both these spheres.

Occasionally the women's responses were encouraging—they were getting a fair wage, or they had a mother-in-law to help look after the children while they worked, or they had taught themselves a special skill, like carpentry or making switch gears, (areas traditionally dominated by men), so they could make ends meet. But these positive responses were rare. All too often the Commission heard tales of abysmally low wages (some as low as 20 paise or Rs. 1-2 per day), of widespread night-blindness from malnutrition, of harassment of officials—from physical abuse by forest guards to bribe-abuse by police in marketplaces—and of an alarming number of families surviving solely on the women's earnings (from 20%-60% in every group the Commission encountered). The most disturbing part of these accounts was that so many of the women had no hope of ever escaping from this drudgery. After having to spend 23 years breaking stones and head-loading in a Rajasthan mine, or peeling and beating coir for 18 years, or being borne into a migrant road crew, or carrying toxic sulphur powder for seven years—all for a fraction of the legal minimum wage—what reason is there to think that their families' lives will change?

Invisibility and Insensitivity

During sessions with Government officials and representatives of voluntary organizations, the Commission often heard reports from the officer, like "In our state, women work very hard—even more than men. The men of our state are very lazy. They only drink liquor and lie around."

Despite these reports, the Commission was also firmly told, "As far as our programmes are concerned, we do not differentiate between men and women except if there are specific targets to be met for women." Yet when the Commission tried to observe women's participation and involvement in these policies and programmes they were largely absent.

Two lasting, disturbing impressions from the Commission's tour stem directly from these kinds of conversations and their contradictory realities. They deserve a special mention here. The first is the insensitivity the Commission encountered time and again on the part of Government officials towards poor working women. The second is how invisible these women are at all levels.

While planning the very first tour, the Commission contacted the concerned official in one State, the Director of Social Welfare. Later, during the tour, they found her to be very interested in and committed to the subject. When she first met them in Delhi, though, for planning the places to visit and the kind of women the Commission wanted to meet, it was very difficult to explain to her who these women are.

When she heard that the Commission wanted to meet poor working women in the unorganized sector, she said, "There are no women in any unorganized sector in our State. There are no groups of women who are suffering from any occupational health hazards."

Then the Commission had to probe. "Are there any women who go to the forests for collecting firewood? Do any women in the rural areas have cattle?"

She said, "Of course. There are many women doing *that* type of work."

The Commission realized that she thought the term self-employed women referred to only artisans or entrepreneurs. She was the first of many to confirm for the Commission members just *how* invisible these working women are to the public at large. If a government official who was concerned and interested did not realize that this sector had problems—or even existed—what about all the less concerned officers who oversee the legislation and project implementation that affects these women?

Another incident in the State illustrates the frustrating insensitivity encountered countless times on the tour. During meetings there with women, the Commission learned about some of the problems women face under TRYSEM. They said they had been given some training in tailoring and knitting which were not very

useful to them. The women said that if training was given to them in their existing occupations, like dairying or agriculture, it would enable them to earn more. They also mentioned good income prospects if they could get training in food processing (apples) and furniture making, as raw materials are easily available and there was a good local demand for the finished products.

When Commission members asked the Block Development Officer and other officials in the District about these training ideas, they said, "Women *cannot* do such activities." After a lot of arguments by the Commission members, the BDO said that women were not coming forward to take training in non-traditional occupations. When one member inquired whether they had even offered such training, he admitted that they had not. He seemed quite upset about the idea of giving training to women in dairying or furniture making.

Another alarming way this insensitivity on the part of officials manifests itself is in the way it affects young girls. The Commission went to see a weaving centre in another State. The Director of Social Welfare and many other officials, accompanied them. At the centre, some young girls (aged 12 to 16) were working on looms, weaving shawls. The home-based workers who do the embroidery on the shawls were also called there to meet the group. The youngest girl in this group was eight years old. All of them were paid on a piece-rate basis.

One of the Commission members was quite disturbed that such young girls were working. When she asked the girls about their education and how many of the girls in the village went to school, they told her that they were all illiterate. The officials said that about 20% of the girls from their village—from economically better-off families—went to school. The majority of the girls were involved in this type of work, though, were never educated.

"Could not the State Social Welfare Department take up some project for these girls' education? Especially since the State Government is involved in marketing their products?" the Commission member asked.

The Director replied in all seriousness, "How will our crafts survive if we send them to school?" !

This kind of callous indifference to women's lives and needs was perceived throughout the Commission's tour. In another State the Commission held a meeting with Government officials and representatives from voluntary and research organisations, while discussing the impact of various government programmes, the official

from the State Rural Development Department reported that only 5.7% of IRDP loanees are women (30% is the required quota).

The Secretary of Social Welfare said that since IRDP has a family-oriented approach, the assistance is given to the head of the household, and thus, women still benefit.

Some of the activists and researchers discussed why giving loans to women could be more beneficial. They argued that the loanees should be given loans as an individual or as a worker. But instead of discussing it further, the Secretary of Social Welfare simply expressed his opinion, to end the argument that a loan/assistance should not be given in a woman's name, because that will "shatter the peace and harmony of the family."

The Commission's query is: where is the "peace and harmony" for widows and for women who are sole supporters of their families?

Against this backdrop of unorganized women's invisibility and the resulting insensitivity they are faced with, the Commission undertook to learn more about these women's lives. The Commission will present an overview of the conditions and situations encountered in the many diverse occupations it found women engaged in across the country. This will set the stage for the following report which covers women's issues in depth. Although this section is divided according to occupation, the reader will find, as the Commission did, that the conditions under which these women labour and the obstacles they are up against are common to all. Appalling working conditions characterize all occupations. No one issue can be isolated as being more important. Each woman is a whole being trying to constantly integrate each aspect of her mother and/or worker status: the diverse issues of what wages, she receives, whether she has proper housing, how many hours a day she is required to work, who helps with her children and what state her health is in all have to be tackled in her daily struggle to survive.

LAND-BASED OCCUPATIONS

Agriculture and Forestry

The Commission met women working as cultivators, agricultural labourers and forest produce collectors in every state it visited. In Himachal Pradesh, besides growing food for their families, women produce cash crops like potatoes, apples, peas, mushrooms, ginger and medicinal plants. In Orissa, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Kashmir and Kerala, women do the work of transplanting, weeding, harvesting, and threshing the paddy. In Gujarat they per-

form similar tasks in the tobacco, cotton, and groundnut fields. In U.P., Bihar and Gujarat they tend, weed harvest and thresh pulses. In the tea plantations of Northern States and Kerala, the Commission found that women comprised 50%-90% of the workers.

Everywhere, regardless of the particular tasks they were performing, these women were hampered by the same problems, viz., that the work is seasonal, and they have few alternatives for income generation. This problem is exacerbated by the very low wages they receive when they do have work. The most common wage women reported earning in agriculture was Rs.4 per day, although the range went from a half a kilo of grain for a full day's work in Maharashtra, to Rs.20 per day in paddy fields in Kerala and Assam. Forest produce collectors' income ranged from Re.0.20—Rs.10 per day, Rs.2 being the most common amount that women receive.

A tea plantation in Mandi, Himachal Pradesh, was the only place on the Commission's entire tour where women reported getting the same wages as men. Everywhere else men were earning from 30%-150% more than the women for the same tasks and working hours.

Men and women did not always perform the same tasks however. Women do not usually plough fields, and men refuse to do certain jobs. In Rajasthan, they refused the work of plucking chillies, which burns their hands, so women were the only ones earning Rs. five a day at that job. And in Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, and Rajasthan, women are the only ones carrying from 12-40 kgs. of fuel and fodder on their heads every day, sometimes as far as 10 km. This forest collection is not for home consumption. The women bring it for the small sum it will fetch on the open market or from a trader—usually about Rs.2.50 per load. The job takes them anywhere from 4-8 hours a day, and carries the additional hazard of harassment by the forest guards. Because no men are with them, they are subjected to verbal abuse, physical harassment, and sexual abuse, as well as being compelled to give bribes to the guards. Sometimes, they must give up part of whatever they are collecting money, fuel wood, or fruits. Often the guards deprive them of their entire collection and drive them from the forest.

The Commission observed a different kind of problem for women in Chobyar village in Kashmir. While driving past this village, they noticed people on both sides of the roads, engaged in transplanting paddy. On stopping to talk to them, they discovered that these people are marginal farmers who practise a "mutual help" system in their villages, labour on each other's farms. No wages are

given for this work, only meals during the time they are at work. The women have to bend continuously while working. Besides back-ache, they get sore, infected feet with fungal growths. The men sit on stools while they do the same work. One man had a radio next to him on the stool. A Commission member asked him why he was sitting when all the women were standing. He pointed to one woman and said, "She is new, so she has to stand." The Commission member gestured toward all the other women, and said, "What about them?" and he replied, "Oh, they prefer to work standing up," despite the accounts the women had just given of their aching backs.

Most of the women whom the Commission met working in agriculture were constantly trying to find other sources of income to tide them over in the off-season. Women in the North-east, H.P., Jammu and Kashmir and Tamil Nadu do weaving during the off-season. Many agricultural labourers in Gujarat, Maharashtra, U.P., Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka take up work with road construction crews in the off-season. Some take work with cobblers, or weavers, or as khadi spinners or tassar reelers.

Everywhere women were trying to acquire loans to get animals to supplement their income often without success, since there were no assets in their family, or no man to take the loan. Many women who had acquired loans through their Mahila Mandal or IRDP, reported small catastrophes in their attempts to raise animals.

One widow, Shanti Devi, in Sanjoli, H.P., told the Commission that she has been staying with her husband's elder brother's family since her husband's death. She said she and her children do all the work on the farm for her brother-in-law and his wife, yet they are never given any cash. She hit upon the idea of earning some money by sheep-keeping. She wanted to take out a loan, but for several years she could not get one because she had no husband, and her brother-in-law refused to sign for her. Finally, her local Mahila Mandal helped her secure a loan. She happily got 20 plus 1 mixed-breed sheep, but they soon all died of disease. As she told her story, she became angry, complaining that she was given no training, and that there is no access to veterinary services in the hill areas. She has not been able to repay her loan, and is being constantly harassed by the bank. When the Commission asked her what her priorities were, she demanded, "There must be teachers for these skills."

The most common occupation for marginal farmers and agricultural labourers to take up in the off-season is forest-product collection. This includes gathering fuelwood, fodder, honey, gum, fruits, and medicinal plants. Women who live close to towns can sell

the products directly and receive a better price for these products, but most women have to deal through traders who exploit them.

Medicinal herb collectors in Raipur, M.P., complained that they earn only Rs.3 selling an entire day's collection to a trader, even though it requires much skill to identify these plants and know in which seasons to harvest them. They said they could earn a fair amount if they could be directly linked to the Vaids. In this regards the efforts of voluntary organisations like Prayog deserve special mention. Representatives from this organisation came to Raipur to meet the Commission. They described their achievements in helping tribal women to set up their own outlets for selling forest produce, developing links with Vaids, and establishing a rapport between the tribals and the forest guards, so that they can deal more amicably with one another. Another important skill they are teaching is how to deal in the marketplace and get a fair price for the costly forest products for which they have been traditionally exploited.

Mirabai, in Udaipur district, Rajasthan, earns about Rs.35 per month collecting honey. It takes her two days to collect one kilo which she sells to a trader for Rs.1.50-2. She did not know the price in the city market was Rs.60 per kg. Her earnings, however, are better than her neighbour's who is involved in gum collection.

It takes Dapubai 10-12 days to collect 10 kg. of gum. The trader's man gives her Rs.7 for 10 kg. She cannot protest at the low price because it is illegal to collect gum. "How can I demand a higher price? The trader's man threatens to report me to the Forest Authorities. Then we will get nothing. We have to accept what he offers." As she told her story to the Commission, she began to cry. "He is a Pardesi (from Gujarat). He has permission to roam about in the forests. But we are the children of the forest, and we are not permitted. We were cultivating land here, growing maize for our children—only that. But even this the Forest Department has taken from us, what can we say?"

Many labourers and forest collectors in Rajasthan have survived only because of the Drought Relief programmes which are giving them foodgrains. Some have not been able to cultivate a crop in last ten years due to lack of water. In the meantime, their heavy reliance on forest products for income keeps pushing the forests further and further back. When the Commission was leaving Mada Village in Kanba district, all the women crowded around the members and one pressed her hands together and repeatedly said, "Behnji, please send famine", meaning the famine Relief Work.

In Punjab, the labourers' difficulties stemmed from the in-

dustrialization of farming practices in the state, and the influx of migrants from U.P. and Bihar who drive the wages down for residents, because they'll accept Rs.8 per day. In the potato fields, women are digging, grading, and packing the crops. They have lost their work as weeders due to extensive use of weed-killers. During the harvest season they work 12 hour days, and they suffer giddiness from the chemicals, along with aching backs and bodies. Some of these women keep cattle to supplement their income from milk sales, but even this is being thwarted by the use of chemicals. The paddy straw which they used to carry home from the fields is too laden with toxins to feed their cattle now. They have also lost the work of transplanting paddy due to the use of a transplanting machine. Even against these odds, women there are still planning for other earning schemes—they told the Commission they wanted ponds for fish farming and said, "If they could only get the Revenue Department to give a third of the village land to us (Scheduled Castes), we could provide green fodder to the whole village."

Most of the women the Commission met and talked with were resourceful, and had priorities and hopes for the future. There were however some who were so defeated by their circumstances that they could not envision any escape from the drudgery and hopelessness of their lives. Latika Pal, a tiny shrunken woman from Sonital village in Bankura dist., West Bengal, was one such woman. She looked like she must have once been beautiful and shining like a fresh brinjal, but now she has withered into a dull, dark, lifeless woman. She is a widow with two young daughters. Her husband died because they had no money to treat him when he was ill. Now she supports herself and her daughters on the Rs.2.50 or Rs.3 she makes from collecting fuelwood, datoons, and fruits on the days the forest guards do not take them away. She looked like she herself didn't eat anything. When the Commission asked her what she would like the most, she did not answer. Some one probed further "How could your situation be improved?" She still could not answer. She could only stare with her glazed eyes, murmuring, "two daughters. two daughters....." Her greatest worry and obsession was to marry off her 10 and 12 year old daughters. But how ?

Another group of agricultural labourers who are in a similarly vulnerable position, are the women of dadan labourers' families from Ganjam District in Orissa. 'Dadan' means to give in advance, and is used for men from this backward area of Orissa who want to migrate out to work. They give an advance to a contractor to help them find work either outside the state or outside the country. Once the men go, they are sometimes never heard from again. The wife

or mother of the migrant does not know what circumstances her husband or her son is in. One woman, Bibi Rawt, saw her husband go off 15 years ago and he has not returned since. One contractor told her that he was sick, and hospitalized in Bombay, but she has received no news since then (10 years ago). "People condemn me as a widow, but I am not. Or maybe I am. God only knows." When asked what her priorities are, she simply replied, "I am too tired." And about the Mahila Samiti in her village, she said, "They cannot do anything for me." In the meantime, she continues working for Rs.5/- day during paddy season—one of many in her position in the area.

At another Orissa village, Sukhinda, the Commission was disturbed by what they witnessed at a Government Seed Farm. 300 women were labouring there. transplanting, irrigating, weeding, and harvesting seedling. They made up 90% of the workers. The supervisors prefer women "because they are efficient. Tribal men are always drunk." Yet there is no creche or medical facility and even drinking water is not within easy reach. This job only provides them with four months of work at Rs.10 per day. All the women said they preferred working on private farms because at least there they could bring their children, and there they are provided with lunch (rice) which the children can also share. They preferred to work on private farms even though their wages were lower there-Rs.8 per day. In the off-season, these women vend, or do casual labour at digging for Rs.5 per day, or make quilts at Rs.1 per quilt. They told the Commission their priorities were drinking water closer to the field, a shed to rest in for a while during recess time, and a better wage of Rs.15 per day.

Another sole supporter of her family was Govindamma, from Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu. She has five children and a husband to support. She managed this on seasonal work in the paddy fields, at which she earns Rs.10 per day, when there is work. Due to drought this year, there is no work in her village. She could not give any reason for her husband not working. When the Commission asked her if she was planning to have a family planning operation, she said, no, she could not, due to a cardiac problem. "Well, what about your husband undergoing the operation?" one member asked. "Oh, he cannot either, because he has to support the family," she replied, despite his unemployed status. When the Commission asked if she sends her children to school, she said. "Yes, because at least there they get a mid-day meal."

Women who have been organized into some Mahila Mandal,

or workers' union, or cooperative society, or have had some interaction with some development project seemed to have a much clearer picture of their rights, and what laws existed to protect them, even if they did not understand how to acquire those rights.

The most unsettling meeting the Commission had with a group of organized women took place in Maheshwaram in Andhra Pradesh. Here they met the Ibrahimpattanam Taluka Agricultural Labour Union members. About 50 women from the 10,000 member strong union attended the meeting. The union was organized around bonded-labourers and exerts efforts to free families from oppressive situations of labouring for little or no wages.

The meeting was unsettling not only because the union is having difficulty in acquiring the rights set out by law for the landless labourers, but also because of recent violence against the labourers, initiated by the landlords and perpetuated by the police and government officials.

The local leader of the trade union, whose family was formerly bonded labourers, spoke very articulately about the non-implementation of minimum wages, lack of any land reforms, and impotency of the land ceiling laws. She told the story to the Commission about the destructive, oppressive situation occurring amongst them:

"We are landless, yet we know about the land reform acts. We could see around us all the land being occupied by large landowners, and we thought, 'so why not bonded labourers?' Several months back the workers began demanding their rights to land by submitting an application for 50 acres of government land. There is a great deal of government land here, and all the landless from this village were asking for only this small parcel. No action was taken on this petition. Finally, we went to occupy the land, and began clearing shrubs so it could be cultivated."

As she began to describe what happened, the entire group of women got agitated and also began to vehemently protest their situation. Pochamma, one of the women who was arrested following the occupation, took up the story and told what happened to her family:

They were working one morning in an orchard of custard apples, for a landlord. The police arrived, with one lady officer. Despite her presence, the police started beating them, pulling their hair, ripping off their clothing, and dragging many of them off to be arrested. Pochamma's daughter-in-law had just given birth a few days before, so Pochamma begged the police not to arrest her as she was still

very raw. The police ordered her to pull up her sari and prove her condition. Following this, they left her and arrested Pochamma. She is a 60 year old woman. They tore out her hair, and tortured her with bending and touching her toes and beating her. She showed the Commission her skinny, wrinkled, old-woman's thigh, still bruised blue two months later. They also arrested her son and tortured him from morning till evening. She described to the Commission how their condition started:

"When we were bonded we did daily 'akili' for the landlord—we cleaned the courtyard, house, and kept the cattle, for which we were sometimes given a small amount of paddy, and once a year, a sari. After we formed the union, we stopped 'akili' for this pittance. Our 'jagriti' (awakening) became unbearable for them, and this type of violence against us began."

Despite their organization, these labourers are still earning only two kg. paddy per day of work, or Rs.3 - Rs.5. They prefer payment in grain, because "this much money is only good for salt". They go hungry in the two months when no agricultural work is available. At the end of the season, they are given 10 kg. paddy per crop, which only lasts six days.

The Lambada tribal women who were present in their bright acquired dresses and heavy ornaments told the Commission that their application for land has been pending for eight months with the Block Development Officer, with no result.

When the Commission asked what their priorities were, they all shouted "LAND". Then they presented this memorandum to the Commission:

"Can we not till land? Cannot the Police be punished for this torture? Is he God that can do anything he likes to us? As women, where is our safety in these villages?"

The Commission members left this village very disturbed and depressed by the reports they had been given.

Despite such disturbing observations in most of the places when the Commission met organized women, they found more positive progress. Some organizations which, with the support of authorities, are making productive headway in women's development work. One is Rajasthan's "Women's Development Project". The Commission members observed a marked difference in the agricultural workers' attitudes in villages where WDP's work has been going on. All the women there know about the benefits of extension services for improved methods in agriculture, about mini-

mum wages for labour, and about acquiring loans. In Udaipur district, the women were aware and agitating about the zinc pollution from the prestigious zinc plant which is destroying their crops and their health. Everywhere in Rajasthan, women are observing the decline of agriculture, and hence, the decline in the chances of employment. However, thanks to the community awareness instilled by WDP, these strong women no longer cry over their fate. Instead, they collectively try to find a solution. When a problem arises, they say, "Chalo, meeting Karengi"! (Come, let us discuss it in a meeting!)

When WDP was started three years ago, their three targets were Education and Training; Health, Nutrition and Family Welfare; and Employment and Economic Development. Awareness on all of these issues could be found everywhere amongst women participating in the programme. They have been successful in fighting against liquor and for clean water. When they were not getting minimum wages for their agricultural labour, they organized and filed a complaint against their contractor to the Collector. They got their fair wage after that.

In another incident, a woman was kidnapped from a village where WDP was centred. After a time, the Sathin (the woman leader from the village) came to know of where this woman had been taken. They went and (with the help of police) brought her back. At first the village would not accept her because she had been staying in another man's house despite the fact that she had been forced to do so against her will. The WDP women went to the Panch of her caste, and persuaded them to accept her back. They agreed, and once they had agreed, the rest of the village also came to accept her.

These types of women were much clearer than unorganized women about setting priorities and making demands when the Commission asked them. From their unanimous demands for "more work", "more income", "more knowledge", the time appears to be ripe for WDP to begin implementing their third objective of Employment and Economic Development on a bigger scale.

Another integrated project which the Commission visited was a good example of many government departments pooling their funds and resources to develop several aspects of landless labourers' lives. This project was in Bade Marenga, Jagdalpur district in Madhya Pradesh. It was one of twenty villages doing this type of project in the area. Two thousand hectares of land has been given to landless tribals from this area for a forestry programme. Under

IRDP they have started an already productive nursery programme raising pineapple and other fruit tree seedlings, as well as fodder and mulberry trees. Women run the nursery, earning Rs.500/month. The Horticulture Department is giving technical training and plant stock to the project. Because the group is tribal, there has not been the usual resistance from males that is found amongst non-tribals, towards women taking this training.

While this nursery/forestry project is operating with the help of NREP, another scheme under RLEGP is manifesting on the land. Housing and a workshed for silk reeling are being constructed. The tribals are constructing the houses themselves, and being paid a rate of Rs.13 per day for women, Rs.15 for men (even under Government schemes, unequal wages are perpetuated).

When the Commission saw all the reeling machines which had been purchased, they asked if women would also do this work. The officials said they were not sure, because "illiterate women cannot manage it, and the more educated women may not want this kind of work."

The Commission members tried to explain to the officials involved how women are being gradually displaced from labour due to mechanization, without a conscious realization by officials. The Commission saw many illiterate women using more complex machines than these on their tour.

This project was developing excellent economic prospects for these landless people, but the Commission noticed a lack of awareness among the women working on this project. They still perceived of themselves as workers, rather than the active thinkers and decision makers which the WDP has developed, in Rajasthan.

Himachal Pradesh was the state where women generally had a higher level of awareness than most other states. One group of women in Lahol know quite clearly that they would like to have some training under TRYSEM, yet they were quite critical of the training which had been offered to them. TRYSEM offered a training course through a potato-growers' cooperative, since it would be easier to reach already-organized women. They offered the training in weaving, which the women do not think has a useful market potential in their area. Furthermore, they offered the course during the peak potato harvest season. "So how could we come?" one woman asked. "If we have our own fields, we must work hard to save all the harvest. If we are working in others' fields, we get higher wages during this time, plus 10 Kg. of potatoes for each day's work."

They, like women in many other states, were interested in

receiving training in processing whatever cash crops were growing in their region. Then they knew for certain that raw materials were available, that there was a market, and that they could earn a better income after the training. These sorts of ambitions amongst women working in agriculture ran parallel to their demands for access to credit, or even more basic things, like clean drinking water, or enforcement of minimum wages, or abolition of the liquor stalls on which they blamed their "sole supporter of the family" status.

Dairying

The women the Commission met who were working at dairying were the poorer women who are engaged in this occupation as marginal farmers, or landless labourers. Most of them worked at other jobs as well, or had taken up dairying because they could not find other work and were able to get a loan for this purpose. They were generally happy about the work they were doing. They enjoy keeping the animals, and they respect the work as well as the extra income. Most of the women only made about Rs.60-70 a month on each animal though they usually keep only one or two cows or buffaloes. Those who are members of milk cooperatives have a higher income up to Rs.150 per month, because the prices are fixed, and the members are not bound to the dealer-cum-moneylender's interest rates and his below market-rate prices.

The problems in dairying work are most acute for landless women, because they have limited access to fodder. A woman from Garam Pani village in Nainital district, UP., told the Commission that each of her two cows gives about three litres of milk a day. She sells it to a dairy at Rs.3/- kg. From her average income of Rs.18 a day, she has to purchase Rs.15 of fodder, as she has no time to go to the jungle and collect it herself. She is now paying back her second loan of Rs.3,000, which she took for her second animal.

Many loan repayment schemes do not take into account the expenses a woman will incur in purchasing fodder for her animal, making repayment rates unrealistic, or leaving the woman with no income. A Scheduled Caste woman, Karunadevi, from Bihar, got a *desi* cow on an IRDP loan. She gets four litres of milk a day, and sells three of them to the local trader. She earns Rs.300/- month, out of which she spends Rs.100 on fodder. She is supposed to pay back Rs.200/- month. She says "Dung is the only source of income from this cow," dung and the small calf, which she will raise into her second milk producing animal. Both she and her husband work as agricultural labourers for about six months of the year. Her husband

averages Rs. 10/- day, while she herself earns about Rs. 4. Since she does not have enough fodder or her land, she buys groundnut cake at Rs. 3/- kg. She said she may only be able to pay back Rs. 150/- month.

Chandrika, the Harijan Secretary of the Deoudholera village milk coopeative in Gujarat, confirms this problem amongst their members. "These loans must be adequate," she told the Commission, "they must include funds for fodder as well as for the milk cattle."

She had a lot to tell the Commission about their experiences in cooperative farming. This is the oldest women's cooperative in the district. She said, "It took us three years to settle down as a co-op. How much could we fight? We had to fight the trader, the dairy officers, the *seths* of the village, banks, men of our own village — sometimes I had to fight my own man. We fight constantly against corruption and oppression, and how ill-equipped we are. It took three years to build solidarity and loyalty, and to educate ourselves in co-op. rules and management. None of us had experience in any of these before. People need to realize how long this process takes."

The Chairwoman of this cooperative, Savitaben, added a few other suggestions to Chandrika's account : "In some cases, daily payment to the women would help fight the trader-cum-money lender's power over them. Also we need to change the role of requiring a 90-day supply of milk from a future member to make her eligible for membership. This automatically excludes the landless, and poor, cowless women from becoming members."

If cooperatives could organize to overcome some of these difficulties, they could offer education and protection to alleviate problems like those of Laxmi, in Andhra Pradesh's Chittoor district. She is not a cooperative member, but has taken a loan on own for her dairying enterprise. She told the Commission, "I took a loan for a cow, but it died of heat stroke. The cow was insured, but I could not get the insurance because I had not paid the premium. Now, tell me, how would I know that I have also to renew the premium every year? Someone should tell me that. I am illiterate."

The Commission heard many such stories about this problem of animals on loan dying before the loan had been repaid. It was usually linked to the animal being a crossbreed which was not suitable to the climate, or too disease-prone, or due to complete lack of training for the woman who received the animal.

Other women have had better experience with their animals though, In Garam Pani, U.P., one such woman was enthusiastic

enough to want to start a dairy cooperative there. She took a buffalo on a loan of Rs. 3500. Last year she repaid Rs. 500 from the income she receives from two litres of milk per day, sold in the local market. She wants more cattle because she has seven family members (adult women) who can attend well to cattle and cattle feed. She also wants more land for both dairying and cultivation. She said, "If you teach me about dairy co-ops., I will teach others."

The low milk price fetched from local traders and the difficulty of getting loans has been somewhat solved for the women who are members of dairy cooperatives. The Commission visited women in such co-ops in Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh and Bihar. One woman from Gujarat, Savitaben, told a story of how the cooperative helped her escape the situations many women find themselves in with the local trader :

"I had only one cow before, but now I have two. A private trader gave us a low price for the milk, but he had also given us an advance — so I was bonded to him. I could not cut the relationship with him because of that advance. Then there was pressure both from him and from the co-op. to give my milk. I was torn between the two. There were others like me, too. The organizer pleaded our cases and we got a loan from the Women's Co-Op Bank. With this, I got released from the trader."

The problem of green fodder still remains. Her 15 acres of land has been mortgaged for many years to a big farmer. She has joined savings scheme in the co-op to help her recover the land. Some of her Rs. 100-Rs. 150 monthly milk income is saved towards that end.

In Dumali village, Vaishali district, Bihar, Kaushalyadevi reported different kinds of positive experiences from her association with the local women's dairy co-op. She owns and cares for three cattles, but sends her husband or son to deliver the milk to the co-op because uppercaste women observe purdah there. She has received training in vet services, cattle care, and milk testing from the co-op. She also went on a study tour to Madras and Anand. She said "We were amazed to see women in Tamilnadu working the fields and everywhere with their heads uncovered by saris. That tour gave us a lot of courage. Because of that, we went to Patna to training which we had rejected twice before the tour."

In her village women were earning an average of Rs.200/month, per animal through the co-op. A Harijan woman, Laxmidevi who owns two buffaloes, said that she has Rs. 80 left after she feeds them — again because she is landless. She told the Commission that she had received training in milk testing but she was

not allowed to work in the co-op. Nonetheless, she attends the meeting of the Managing Committee to urge the co-op. to accept other Harijan women unto their membership. They are not so fortunate as the Gujarati women though. They also are bound by loans to the local trader, and until they are repaid, they cannot join the cooperative.

Both Laxmidevi and Kaushalyadevi said their priority was a Mahila Bank in the village. The upper caste woman also said she wanted to see an anganwadi in Dumali.

The extension worker for this Mahila Kutubpur Dugdha Ut-padak Mandali co-op. was patient and sensitive to the women's needs. She said, "The women take time to settle in and adjust to their roles in the co-op. But their co-op. runs better than the men's because they are more honest."

In another Bihar co-op., in Chakiari, when the Commission asked the women about their priorities, they unanimously shouted, "MahilaBank."

One Commission member countered, "Who will run it? You are all illiterate!"

"Our daughters will run it!" they shouted. "They are literate."

The Commission saw this kind of remarkable self-motivation again in Himachal Pradesh. In Mashobra block, one woman has a Jersey cow from which she earns Rs. 70/month. But she said Jersey milk was not preferred in her village, and transportation to the city is a problem, so the milk sometimes gets wasted. She had not received any training in cattle care or milk production, but she and many other women urged the Commission to give them some training.

"We have good resources for butter," this 40 year old, illiterate woman suggested. "Give us training, and help us get equipment to increase our yield."

"What kind of equipment?". one Commission member asked.

"Like tractors that will work in hilly areas!"

"Will you drive the tractor yourself?" she asked.

"Yes — to improve our lives, I will. Please teach us these things," she said, "otherwise our lives will be like that of buffaloes."

Everybody laughed, but she went on to insist, "If we form a co-op. we will have to be assured of a market — otherwise it will not be successful."

The Himachal Pradesh Women were not the only ones anxious to get training. Assamese women stressed what important assets their cattle are to them, but they really need training to make them more productive. One woman in Gauhati who has a Jersey cow on IRDP loan, gets only one litre of milk a day. She has not been able to repay any of her Rs. 4000 loan.

Again and again, the Commission heard plea for veterinary training. In the hilly areas like Himachal Pradesh, houses and villages are scattered, and women want to know the skills themselves, so they can care for their animals properly, before they die.

In Andhra Pradesh, women have been organized longer into co-ops., promoted by the State Dairy Development Corporation. They have acquired skills of good cattle care, account keeping, management techniques, and sound business practices. The Government lends good support there. In Nalgonda district, most of the cooperative members are Harijans. One member claimed, "The upper castes are not interested in dairying because there is not much return from cattle. The land can be put to more productive use, like cash crops."

One other A.P. woman, Ulaimma, was not a member of a co-op. She voiced a common complaint that the Commission came across in their meetings — the unreasonable length of time to acquire a loan:

"The bank took months to negotiate the loan. During that period the cow sauntered by me two times and went out of my hands. Finally, when the bank was ready, the seller raised the price of the cow. The bank stuck to its amount of Rs. 3000, so I had to borrow Rs. 500 from someone else.

"But I got the cow, and she is good. She has given me a calf now, and I am happy."

Small Animal Husbandry

The women the Commission found engaged in small animal husbandry were of two kinds — either from a family which traditionally raises small animals as their caste occupation, or women who were trying to bring in some extra income outside of their agricultural work. Most women felt very comfortable doing this kind of work. It was a natural extension of their maternal skills, and they were usually good at it. No one the Commission met was earning much from this occupation though. And they heard several disaster stories of women who had taken loans but no training, their animals

dying and making failures of their schemes for a better income.

A Nagaland woman's account of all the work she has to do to make ends meet at home was typical of small animal raisers all over the country. She was from Kohima village, and when the Commission asked her what occupations she was engaged in, she held up her hand to count what she did during her 14 or 15 hour-long workdays: "Work in the fields, gather fuel, fodder, rear pigs, weave, carry water, cook, care for the children." She said she earns about Rs. 70 every month from rearing 15-20 pigs. Her uppermost priority was employment for her educated sons, "so we will not have to work so hard."

A Vaghari family in Banaskantha district in Gujarat is engaged in the traditional occupation of bird rearing. The woman's son goes to the jungle to catch parrots, swallows, and other birds, and brings them to her to rear. She prepares the cage, trains the birds along with her husband, and prepares them for market. Her son goes to Ahmedabad to sell the birds at the Sunday market. The family income from this is about Rs. 600 per month, but the son squanders some of the money on drinking when he goes to market. The woman is trying to get her daughter-in-law to take the birds to market, since she is from the town, or at least go with her husband, so he will not be able to steal the money.

The woman was not interested in a loan — in fact she was afraid of it. "If we fail to repay, they would take my son to jail, and the police would beat us!"

Her fear of already being poor and then falling into debt is a reality for many poor women. They are given a loan-based scheme without training or no access to veterinary skills, or a *videsi* breed of animal which is vulnerable to the climate or the diseases of the area.

One woman in Kulu, H.P., is under the curse of an IRDP loan her husband took to get ten goats. He took the loan without consulting her. If he got any training, she was not included. After a while, the husband died. Since she did not know about goat rearing, nine of the goats died. She had no income, and was angry as well as destitute. "Now I have to feed the babies, the damned goat, and feed the Bank!"

One of her neighbours has a different problem with her loan — her rabbits have not died, but she is being charged 18% interest. She took the loan against her husband's wishes to add another 80 rabbits to the 20 which she already had, so he will not help her in repaying it. She only earns Rs. 50 per month, and is frustrated be-

cause she is only repaying interest, not the loan. Her demand was for a low interest rate.

Several women in Udaipur district suffered identical fates with the IRDP loans they took for chickens. They were given 'foreign' poultry. One woman's husband was planning a village co-op., for marketing eggs. He was organizing other villagers who had also received loans for chickens. All their chickens died. The co-op. became a joke. The women said, "We prefer the Desi variety of chicken which are not disease prone!" and "I was hoping for more income!" and finally, "My dream is shattered."

At least their loans were smaller. Another woman in Udaipur took a Rs. 5,000 loan on her own name, for 100 chickens. The loan procedure was very cumbersome. She said, "I had to open at least three bank accounts. I had to go three different times to the bank to open them. Because I have land, I got the loan. But the loan did not succeed because all the chicken died. Now that I have taken a loan, and because I have land — you know what kind of land we have in Rajasthan — I am rejected from the famine relief work. Now what?"

A success story of an IRDP loan was encountered in Gujarat. The Commission met a family of the Vaghari community in the Mehsana district. They were landless, but raising about 200 chicken next to their kutcha house. Out of 12 houses in their neighbourhood, half have poultry. This family had only 13 chicken before. They twice took loans under IRDP, and now they have 200. They did not get any training, but this did not hamper them as they are traditional rearers of chicken, pigs and other birds. They were very appreciative of the loan facility. Now they earn about Rs. 500 per month, from the woman of the family selling the birds in the Mehsana market.

The Commission was also lucky to meet a Gujjar community on the roadside when they were on their way from Achbal to Pelgaum. They were sheep herding on the banks of the Lidder river, and had made a camp near the road. The Commission members got down from their jeep to meet a five-generation family who were all migrating together. They were headed by Zaina, the oldest member of the family, a woman looked about 70 years old. Zaina and her daughter-in-law Manzoora told the Commission members that in summer they return to Kashmir, and in the winter they move to Jammu with all their family and herds. They said "Our biggest fear is wild animals. They devour our sheep. This year we lost 36 of 261 sheep to them. Because of this our sheep often stay in the tents with us. This little one shares her blanket with the sheep!" they said point-

ing to one little daughter.

They keep guard dogs to prevent this slaughter. They face other problems as well. This year the river flooded and their tents got submerged. They lost one infant who got very ill.

While they are travelling, this community of about 40 people engages a teacher to give education to their sons and daughters. The teacher is a SSC pass boy of their community, and his salary is paid by the State Government.

Fishery

The women the Commission met were engaged in fishing work generally undertook one or more of the three tasks—fish processing, fish vending, and net-making. After meeting women involved in these tasks in Kerala, Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Orissa, the Commission felt that women who were involved in traditional fishing practices were steadily losing ground against the mechanised fishing sector. Mechanised production techniques have many ramifications on traditional fisher peoples' lives. Because they trawl in deep water, netting larger catches, and have fishing facilities, transportation networks, and a greater range of markets, they are capturing the lion's share of the market. Many women complained about losing their space in the markets to these larger vendors, and how much more vulnerable their produce is to spoliage, because they lack chilling and transportation facilities.

One major factor in women fish vendors' difficulties is their exclusion from the fishing cooperatives to which the men of the village belong. Because they are not members, they cannot get credit to help expand their vending operations, or organize the hire of reliable transport, or learn sound business practices, or become informed about issues affecting them.

Women in Pathara, Ganjam district, Orissa, told the Commission about their work as vendors. The first one said she daily buys 1/2kg-2 kgs. of the fish from men in the village. She earns Rs. 3-Rs. 6 per day. Her priority was to get credit. She had no idea about cooperatives.

Her neighbour buys fish from a wholesaler. When she is not able to sell it all, or becomes too tired walking through the villages (she often suffers legache and bodyache), she dries the fish—it can easily be sold. She also would like more capital so she could expand her scales and earn more. She has tried to take a loan, but could not get it. She said she was afraid of loans and banks. A Com-

mission member asked her how much loan she needed. She replied, "Rs. 20"

"Is that all?!"

"Yes it is enough!" she answered emphatically.

The third woman there said she makes nets on order. She is supplied with the nylon thread, and earns Rs. 8-10 per net. She gets an average of four orders a month. During the season she gets up to 20 orders a month. "Still", she said, "it is very difficult to cope, because I am alone. My husband has gone to Kuwait. He sends me an average of Rs. 1500 every two months, but all that money goes into repaying the loan he had taken to go to Kuwait. I have been repaying regularly for 35 instalments. I do not know how long to repay. He does not write to me. May be he himself does not know."

"Now, I want a loan for myself. Then I could buy my own nylon and keep the nets ready for sale." When one member asked her if she belonged to the village co-op., she said, "No, but I would like to become a member."

In Trivandrum district, Kerala, the Commission met with a women's organisation of fish vendors, procesors and net-markes. Their demands were clearly articulated. They were not getting space in the markets because men were usurping their places. Tax collectors and other goondas harass the women vendors. They do not know how to deal with goondas like the men vendors do. These women resent the tax these men collect, because they did not even get legitimate space. These women vendors want a separate market. Another complaint they lodged was about the government scheme to compensate men's fishing accidents with Rs. 50,000 while women are not covered by the scheme.

Aleyamma, one of the organizers of this group, said, "Men's applications for pension are encouraged, but not ours. The officers do not accept women as producers. What we need is a separate women's wing in the Fish Welfare Society."

Vasnatha, another member, began to wave her arms angrily as she interrupted her and said, "And also, it should be compulsory for every co-op. of fisher folk that women be members! If not, they can go on catching fish. If we do not sell them, men's fish will rot the whole of Kerala – understand?"

A women vendor at the meeting raised other issues when she told the Commission her story : "My man goes to sea, catches fish, and sell them to the wholeseller. I cannot sell his fish, because it will not sell in our market. I buy my fish from the market and sell in

surrounding villages. Both of us are losers, as such. There is very little profit margin in this vending. Fish caught by machine-boats are cheaper. They also have iced-fish. Our fish gets rotten quickly. Then, transport is also a problem. Our organisation fought and got vehicles by MATSYAFED, but we have to pay Rs.65 per month for it. This is a lot when we only earn Rs.10-15 per day. And if we miss the bus, we have to hire a scooter, which eats up the entire day's earnings! What we need are transport and loan facilities for all of us. And I mean quick loans, at the time of the season."

Some other women in this group were preparing fish pickle in their homes, for MATSYAFED, and they were earning Rs. 130 per month. All of them were ready to produce more, but are waiting for market development.

After this meeting, the Commission went to visit the MATSYAFED Centre, right on the coast in the Trivandrum District. Here women were doing fish processing into pickle, packed dry fish, and fish cutlets. Here also, because of limited market, the women are only earning Rs.100 per month.

Here in this coastal village, at dusk, as tourists, we watched men, women and children busily engaged in producing alcohol near their house. Their three storeyed pucca house stood as a guarantor of their good income. We did not disclose our identity.

A different kind of MATSYAFED Centre is operating in Quilon. Woman use the centre by paying a service charge of 30 paise per kg. of fish they clean there. They buy shrimps and prawns from the landing centre which is right there, for Rs. 20/kg. They peel and clean them in the hygienic conditions of the centre. Then they sell them to the freezing centre for Rs. 30-40/kg. They also have the option of taking them to the local market, but they do not usually risk that. These women have an average income of Rs. 15-25 per day.

One other fishing vendor in Bombay expressed similar problems as the Orissi, Keralite, and Gujarati fish vendors. She sells fish in Dharavi slum, but faces constant police harassment. She earns up to Rs. 20 per day, but she says, "I do not earn much because of lack of ice facility. Ice is very costly for me, and we are caught in this competition of iced and fresh fish."

The Vaghari community in Dholka block village, Gujarat, is up against a different power struggle. They complained of the local power groups not allowing them to catch fish in the village ponds, which is their traditional right. There is a government policy to let

the Panchayat auction off the village ponds. The Panchayat takes possession of these ponds, but the benefits are not seen by the village, the profits are misappropriated by those in charge.

One Vaghari woman said, "Do not think the Panchayat themselves will fish the pond. They do not have these skills, and it is low work for them. So instead they have to employ us to fish for them, and thus we are turned into their servants. Instead, we want our age old occupation. Our association fought for this, and the Panchayat control was temporarily stayed. But what good now? Now there is no water in the village ponds. No rain, no water, no fish, no vending! There is not even agricultural labour left because of the drought.

"Now we are doomed to be labourers, digging the earth on worksites, getting bullied by supervisors and gangmen. Our women never used to do this work-we were self-employed. Now others are laughing at me in their minds. I used to give them fish on credit when they did not have cash. Now I have to stand in line to be paid cash. I used to easily earn Rs. 12-15 per day's work. Now we work eight hours in the open sun. I dig and dig earth as hard as stone and earn only Rs. 7 or 2kg. foodgrains per day-but paid not daily-three weeks later! This drought has levelled us all to the same poor state".

On the Veraval sea coast of Gujarat, where there are 13 large commercial fishery units, the Commission met different groups of women. The first were the local women who are traditionally members of fishing villages. They sometimes do peeling or headloading work for the processing units in high season when there is surplus catch. For peeling one big basket, they earn Rs. 100. It takes the family about 2-3 hours, doing the work collectively. They do not generally get this kind of work. Most of the labourers at the processing units are migrants from Kerala. The local women do not like to stand continuously for eight hours like the Kerala girls do. They also refuse to come at the irregular hours when the boats arrive. They also have their own fish processing and trading of their husbands' catches. And they do not want to work for such low wages as the migrants take. Generally, they prefer trading to wage labour work. Because of this attitude, the management of the processing units do not like to hire local women. They claim that they are not so dextrous at peeling, and their judgment is not so good in the grading work.

The other group the Commission met here were the migrant labourers. They had a very different story. They were mostly between 13-20 years of age, even though the younger ones all answered "18" when asked. Most were educated to the SSC level.

They have been recruited from Cochin and Eranakulum districts, where their families are very poor. They peel and grade the fish at whatever time the boat arrives — usually evenings, for eight hour stretches. They earn between Rs.210 and Rs.240 per month. They get two months of leave each year in the off-season--one month is paid. During this time they go back to Kerala. A few of them told the Commission about their family circumstances:

Mary has no father. Her mother is a domestic maid at one family's house, where she earns Rs.50 per month. Her three younger brothers are studying. Her elder brother (who is 15) is a coolie in a coconut yard.

Malini is a young mother of two small children (two and four years old). She left them behind in Kerala. She sends Rs.200 back home every three months. Her husband is a clerk earning Rs.500 per month.

Julie told how the contractor had duped her saying she would earn Rs. 450 per month in Veraval. But she only gets Rs.210.

These girls all stay in a house the processing unit is renting in the town, but it is very crowded. They have only a bodylength of space for sleeping. There is open land in front where they spend most of their time when they are not working. The older girls take care of the younger ones. Many are sisters.

Mostly the girls were in a state of flutter and fear while the Commission was there. They were very much afraid of the press, and most of them would not speak to the Commission members when they asked them questions.

Due to the Migrant Labour Act, the processing units made the former contractors into the girls' supervisors. These supervisors are with the girls constantly, They even accompany the girls when they go shopping together in the market. None of the girls have learned the local language, even after 5 or 6 years in that place, though the local supervisor had learned Malayalam. The employer keeps the girls secluded in the name of "protection". Now the employer is going to build a hostel adjacent to the processing plant, so they will be even more segregated from the outside world.

When the Commission said to the girls, "The Government should build the hostel for you in town", they quickly refused. "We will not stay in it," they said, "so please do not undertake any expense for us."

When the Commission members asked them about their priorities, again no one would speak. They prodded and provoked

them, but not until the meeting was dismissed the Commission was about to leave, did the girls press around them and say in whispers. "Rs.500/per month, please."

Sericulture

Both tassar and mulberry sericulture have been traditional occupations for Indian women for centuries. For tribal women it traditionally means gathering tassar cocoons from the forest and selling them to a trader, or in the open market. These silk-collector also actively move the silk worms from one *Arjun* tree to another, enabling them to produce large cocoons. The cocoons are traditionally supplied to a non-tribal weaver's family, where women undertake boiling the cocoons and reeling the thread. Reeling is a process where a woman pulls the inner silk threads from several broken cocoons simultaneously, and twists them by rolling them over her bare thigh ot over bottom of a clay pitcher. This process produces a fine silk thread.

In the last ten years, due to increased exports several *Arjun* plantations have sprung up to actually cultivate the tassar, which originally was a natural forest product. Both commercial and government development scheme plantations have been established. Besides employing the traditional collectors, i.e. tribals to work on the plantations and rear cocoons, some organizations are also training the women to be reelers or spinners. Other projects are incorporating the traditional reelers into the cultivation and rearing processes, so that each group can be involved in the entire process, thereby by-passing the problems of traders reaping all the profits and women's sporadic access to work.

The Commission visited tassar cultivators and labourers in M.P., Bihar,, and Orissa. The Madhya Pradesh integrated development project for tribals in Jagdalpur district, where part of 2000 hectares is under *Arjun* cultivation has already been discussed in the section on agriculture.

In West Bengal, the Commission met women at Jhilmill in Bankura district, who had undergone training in tassar cultivation and are now growing *Arjun* on two plots of government land, with government assistance.

In Pothmari village, Assam, women were learning tassar rearing and reeling through their Dipti Mahila Samiti. They were working on the government farm and had taken IRDP loans to get set up in cocoon rearing. The women said that they now want to learn to grow the *Arjun*.

Bihari women whom the Commission met in Patna received reeling and weaving training with a stipend of Rs.150/month. When the training ended, though, the women were left without much work. Meenadevi complained that she does not have a good outlet for purchasing cocoons. Anardevi said her priority was electricity in her home so that she can work more. She receives very low wages for weaving, and thus needs to work for longer hours each day. Her problems are experienced by many Bihari women. The private contractors pay abysmally low wages for silk processing, but they give regular work. The Khadi & Village Industries Commission, on the other hand, gives a better price but work is very irregular.

Tassar silk makes up a small percentage of India's silk production. Mulberry makes up the larger part of the production, and women traditionally know all the steps of this process.

In Orissa the Commission visited a government mulberry farm at Shukhinda. It occupies part of a large farm managed by the Agriculture Department. Forty women were employed there at Rs.10/day to care for the mulberry bushes. They work from 8 a.m. to 5.30 p.m. planting, transplanting, irrigating, weeding, and harvesting leaves. Their male supervisor said these women were good workers "compared to men."

The women knew that this cultivation of mulberry was being used to produce silk, but did not know anything about the further process. They seemed to be interested in further involvement in silk processing.

Kalavati said, "Our work here is only for four months in the monsoon and four months in winter. The rest of year we have to pass our days with difficulty—going for digging at Rs.5/days and making quilts at the rate 1 kg foodgrains for stitching six quilts. Some of us also vend vegetables in town.

"We are happy with this work—we just want more work."

In Karnataka, at Chandapur village, the Commission met a group of women connected with the sericulture programme. Bhadramma cultivates mulberry on one of her three acres of irrigated land. There are ten such women in the village who are cultivating mulberry. Their mulberry yields three crops a year. The programme began in 1985. They hire female labour, paying Rs.7/day, plus one meal. These labourers were girls recruited through the village Mahila Mandal.

Ashwathamma, one of the ten women mulberry cultivators, had taken a loan to get irrigation on her land. She and all the other

cultivators sell their cocoons to the centre of the sericulture department. None of them was involved in spinning or weaving, though they showed willingness to learn them, rather than simply turning the cocoons over to the centre. Their Mahila Mandal is trying to arrange training through TRYSEM in their own centre. The women workers there said, "The advantage of sericulture is that it gives us work the whole year, unlike agriculture, which is seasonal."

Over the border in Tamilnadu, the Commission visited a sericulture farm in Coimbatore district. Fifteen hundred acres of land has been allotted to 200 farmers. They each cultivate 1/2 an acre in mulberry. Women are involved here in cultivating mulberry, rearing cocoons, and selling them. They are harvesting six crops a year here. "The women involved in rearing are very careful and alert and skilled," the extension worker said. "By seeing them though, the landless feel at a loss."

Spinning is done in a workshed, where men and women are segregated. Only 20% women are being trained in this work, although on private farms in the area this work is performed completely by women.

"I was sent to observe this government training centre and for that I had to learn cycling," the extension worker shyly told the Commission. She is an SCC pass woman, living alone in a small village. "Women come to me for advice, and now men have also begun to come to me for advice on their children's education."

In Punjab's Gurdaspur district there are sericulture extension workers and one Rural Development Agency's plant for silk reeling. Till now, there are no women extension workers there.

In Assam, at Gauhati, where women do everything from cultivation to weaving, they complained about the emergence of middlemen at every stage of the silk production process. "Unlike before, because of these middlemen, we no longer know where to sell our finished cloth. And even if we do know we cannot sell it easily, because of our lack of capital. And loans to women are rare and difficult to get."

MINING

When the Commission went to visit the Eastern Coal Mines at Raniganj in West Bengal, they met a 62-year old women shalepicker who had been working at this occupation for more than 50 years. Giria related her history to the Commission members. Her story illustrates women's displacement by mechanisation from their oc-

cupations in mining and how legislation has not only not protected them, but is actually pushing them out of work. The current state of affairs is that everything underground belongs to the domain of the principal employer, and his workers are protected. All underground workers are men. Everything on the surface is given out to a contractor, who hires only casual labour, the majority of whom are women.

Giria began her story by saying that there had been problem getting regular work here in the old days. She used to bring many women to get work here. When the British owned the mines, a large number of women worked underground. Now she only does shale picking, and the number of women workers has gone down greatly. Many years back she used to get Rs.20/- per month. Now she earns Rs.1000/- "if I do not get sick."

She did not remember exactly when she began working in the mines, but she thought she was about ten. Her two brothers were close to her in age. One brother was left home to care for their land. They came with their aunt and uncle. They used to all work shoulder to shoulder underground. There was nothing bad about it, she said. She worked with her brother and one uncle who later died in jail during the freedom struggle. The men dug, and women and children carried the coal. In the wartime they worked hard for more production, and they earned more. "Many women worked underground." Giria said, "I do not know who thought of it. Was that Gandhi Bapu?"

In the British days, when there were hordes of women workers, some of them were under the malik, and some under the contractor. They all had the same working conditions in terms of hours of work and wages. Then some of the women were taken up by the malik. Giria was the unfortunate one to be left out. She remained with the contractor. The government forced the malik to protect their workers, but the contractors were not forced to do anything for them. Also, the unions protect the malik's workers, but they do not come to protect the contractor's workers.

"For many years, I lived with the hope that the malik might absorb me. The malik is now the government itself," she told the Commission. As times progressed while she was left with the thekedar, her brother was taken up in the mines as organized labour. He gradually rose to a position with a fixed salary, housing, schooling for children, and even travel allowance. He bought some shops in the town from his savings. Now his son is a technician in the Railways. "They swam through the poverty, while I stayed here at the mercy of the contractor," she complained.

She said her sons are not educated and they are "good for nothing fellows." She works while they enjoy themselves. Her husband who was working in the mines died of old age.

Her third brother was left to look after their land and trees. But the trees were all cut and sold and the land mortgaged. Now it is gone from their hands, and he is a landless labourer. He works in the agriculture season at Rs.10/-day, and in the off-season goes to Calcutta to pull a rickshaw for a master. He has contracted T.B. in the process. Giria helps support him as well as her sons.

"Why do you think there is the discrimination between men underground and women on the surface?" the Commission asked.

She replied, "The maliks say that they have to close down mines because labour is costly. Yet the contractor's keep getting fatter and fatter. What the logic is, I do not understand.

"Now we hear that even this surface work will be ended, because the conveyor held will displace loaders further. Is this true?" She asked the Commission members.

We were told by the official that of the total 1,18,000 workers at ECML, 8 per cent are women. Thirty per cent of the women workers are casual labour. There are three types of mines there—pit mines, inclined mines, open cast mines. Before mechanization, women graded coal, threw waste, picked shale, and headloaded coal. Though they are much fewer numbers today, they still do shale picking, loading and breaking the coal to dust. Casual labour women are paid on a piece rate basis and belong to open cast mines. They are paid Rs.45 for loading 4.5 tonnes into wagons. That money is divided by the four or five labourers who share the work, and it takes them about five hours to load one wagon. The Commission also found women working at the mines serving in the canteens, making clay cartridges, sweeping, carrying domestic coal and as ash-kamin and general kamin.

Seventy-two women came to meet the Commission from the Amritnagar Colliery. Babuban Bibi was a headloader from Doomka district in Bihar. She had lost all the hair on the top of her head from headloading. She earns Rs.600/- per month. She spends Rs.150 on her children's school fees and Rs.50 on house rent. That leaves her Rs.400 to support her six children and herself. Her husband died from asthma. She said headloading was very strenuous work, and that she wanted higher work." But there is no such work available for women in these mines," she complained.

Sonakali Devi reports similar circumstances. Her husband

died of T.B. while working in the mines. She thinks she also has it. She starts at 4 p.m. doing wagon loading, and works till 12 or 1 p.m. when the wagon is loaded. Then she goes home to care for her five children. The wagons only arrive three days in a week, and she is paid on piece-rate. Her priorities were 'lighter work' and a 'pension.'

Another woman who works with her, Punmasi Panda, has to bring her two year old son with her while she works. And Kumari barely manages to support her six daughters on the Rs.375/- month that she makes headloading. Julie, a shalepicker, said many women took 'voluntary retirement' under some pressure, and gave the jobs to their sons, but have since regretted their choice, because "the sons are of their wives, not their mothers who helped them get the job, and now they have lost their wages."

There were some obvious divisions in this meeting, first between shalepickers and headloaders. The shalepickers are in the privileged position. Their work is lighter, and they want to protect this position. The second division was amongst the headloaders themselves. The majority of them were tribals, used to doing heavy labour. A few were more middle class widows, whose husbands has been killed working in the mines. As per the policy, they were given jobs. They were not used to manual labour, and complained loudly that the work was too difficult. Even though they were a minority, they talked the most. They gave a biased view to the discussion, because the majority of headloaders were not unhappy with their jobs.

All these women belonged to the union. Their union fees were regularly deducted from their wages, but they did not seem to have much contact with the union.

The Commission asked the women some general questions about underground work, and operating machines—two jobs women have been kept out of. The tribal women so far had not spoken. But their eyes shone, showing their eagerness to do either job. One tough one said, "Yes, I can operate the machines if I am trained." But generally, it seemed that they were inhibited by the presence of the other women, the management officials, who were present.

At the close of their meeting, Santhosh Matora, a 30-year old wagon loader from Bihar stood up to talk. She said she had passed the SSC and knows typing, but since her husband's death has had to take up this work to support her three children. The union helped her get this job, but she said she wanted a job appropriate for her skills.

The Commission had invited union representatives to attend the meeting, but none of them showed up. Later the Commission met them by chance in the canteen, and tried to probe into their stand on these women workers. They answered them flatly:

"There is very little work for women."

"Women have welcomed the idea of voluntary retirement."

"Our Workers Education Classes are not successful because of lack of interest on the part of the workers. We started tailoring classes, but it did not work."

"Illiteracy is the result of the backwardness."

The wives of the management officers sincerely wanted to do some good work with these women, but they were at a loss about what to do.

The Commission visited the Chrome Charge Project at Brahmani Pal, Keonjar district, where all the chromium and iron alloys are produced and exported to Japan. The women at this alloy's Plant were involved in sizing and grading the chromium and iron in the open sun. There was no roof over their workplace. Santhals and other tribals and many unmarried young girls were involved in this work.

Karmi has worked there for one year shifting materials for Rs.12.70/day. She told the Commission that she felt the working conditions were very poor. "Even the slippers we have to buy, and they do not even last a month. There is so much walking inside the plant, as well as commuting from the village." She had heard of gloves to be used for handling the rough material, and she demanded that they be provided.

Pansuri Devi agrees that the working conditions are difficult, but she prefers this work because it is regular all year round, unlike the agricultural work at home. She is a Santhal, working as a grader here while her mother-in-law cares for her two children.

There were 800 workers at this plant, 300 of which are contract workers. They all wished for some medical facilities for themselves and their old family members.

At the Daitory Mines in the Bali Parvat hills, only processing work is done. It is a totally mechanized plant. There are 35 women working in the office, and then women working in loading-contract work. For loading 15 tonnes in a truck, men earn Rs.14 while women get Rs.12. These women have always worked on construction, not mines.

In Daitory, the women first have to walk 5-6 kms. to load trucks. They get Rs. 14/truck, but they divide it amongst seven headloaders (men and women get equal shares). Some days there is only one truck to load, some days two or three. Their priority was "more trucks," i.e. more work.

At the OMC chromite mines at Kaliapani, Sukinda, the Commission saw the biggest open mines in the country. The management said that there were 1198 piece-rate workers, 140 of whom are women. But the Commission members saw a great deal more than that working on this surface. A gang of 15-25 work together breaking chrome pieces and loading and unloading. These Santhal women cycle to and from their village to work.

When the Commission met them, their heads were covered with muddy checked towels and dirty white helmets. They wore rubber shoes on their feet and had thin, sinewy, strong bodies, black skin, and muddy hands. They were cheerful and joked with one another while they talked to the Commission.

Sukanti is a landless woman whose husband looks after three children while she does this work. On piece rate, she earned Rs. 450 las month.

Shrimati bought a bicycle from her wages for Rs. 630. Now on the bike she brings her husband who also works here. She earned Rs. 350 for ten days last month. There is a creche there with 15 children. She did not get any maternity benefits, but her union did help get a bonus last year. She would like to keep cattle, but there is no place in her house, and she cannot show any asset to the bank (except her bicycle) for taking a loan.

In Madhya Pradesh, the Commission visited the Bhilai Steel Plant and Iron Ore Mines. Of the total workforce, of 13000, 3700 were regular employees, including 200 women (less than 5%); 1300 more women work on piece rate, and 2600 more under contractor. Women do scrapping and wagon loading. The permanent women work in creche, canteen, as water carriers, but none in any technical jobs. The Labour Officer said they have had only two cases of maternity so far because most of the women are over 40. He also said, "Since manual mining is very costly, the Labour Department has introduced mechanization. That is the policy from the top, so we have not been recruiting new women for two years now."

The senior union leader for this mine confirmed this policy when the Commission met him where he was hospitalized. He said, "The first victims of mechanization in the plant are women. Then at

home, they are pressurized to voluntarily retire in favour of men. We wrote to other women's organizations to incite them to take action against this practice. It is a difficult issue for us. The women who do not agree to retire are retrenched, and then their post is not filled. If they retire, then the job will be given to one of their male family members. Thus the union has to partially support the policy so that jobs will not be lost with women's departure.

He also said that mechanization did not save the mining industry money. He said, "Donapri mines, Bilaspur, and Nandini mines all have a large number of women. They are paid Rs.10-15 per day, instead of the Rs.35-40 the mine has to pay one man to operate the Pockland mechanized shovel. The machine is costlier under any circumstances, and every three months, new machines are arriving."

Then he mentioned a more distant effect of the mass unemployment occurring since the introduction of these machines. "This high number of unemployed get discontented, and there is a great deal of tension in the town. The union is made responsible for it, and violence often breaks out. These people just simply need work."

A representative of the women workers from Hirri Mines, Bilaspur, came to meet the Commission. Ansuyabai and her 200 women co-workers were forced out of work, while their husbands were regularised and transferred to Bhilaion on the condition that wives accepted "voluntary" retirement. Formerly, both she and her husband were piece rate workers.

TOBACCO AND BIDI WORKERS

After agriculture, the bidi and tobacco processing sector employs the largest number of women workers in the country. Some collect the tendu leaves from the forest and sell them to traders. Others are engaged in tobacco processing. They dry the leaves, cut or grind them, mix them with oil so they will remain moist, grade them, bag them, and load, unload, and stack them, in their transportation routes to bidi and cigarette manufacturers. Most of the women involved in this industry are bidi rollers. The majority of them carry out this work at home. Their work consists of acquiring the materials, cutting the tendu leaves, filling them with tobacco, folding the ends, tying them closed with thread, and binding them into bundles of a given size. The rolling and folding is a skilled job which takes an average of six months for a woman or child to learn expertly. In some places the last process is also in the women's

hands—the packaging and labelling of the bidi.

Bidi and tobacco is the one sector where comprehensive legislation is in place, aimed at protecting women labourers. The main two Acts covering their employment condition are the Bidi and Cigar Workers Act, and the Bidi Workers Welfare Fund Act. The fact of this legislation, though, and its implementation, are two very divergent realities. According to these laws, it is the responsibility of the principal employer to pay his workers a minimum wage, to provide creche and medical facilities, to give maternity benefits, and to register the worker for provident fund and scholarship benefits. Home-based workers are also eligible for these benefits. The following accounts of the Commission's meetings with these workers, though, will illustrate how blatantly disregarded these laws are in practice.

In most places the Commission found that the manufacturers have adopted a contract system in bidi production. Any given manufacturer employs between two and 600 contractors. Large contractors in turn hire sub-contractors. Despite the statutory minimum wage fixed in each state, contractors set their own lower wage rate when contracting women to do the work. This is just the beginning point of their exploitation, however. The law materials they deliver to the workers are almost always underweight. Therefore the women always produce fewer bidis than the number the contractor has assigned them. The women have to pay from their wages for the number of bidis lacking—usually 10%-30% of their daily wage. On top of this, contractors practise a fixed deduction of Rs. 2 per week, and then proceed to reject 5%-20% of the finished bidis as defectively rolled. They indiscriminately make this rejection claim even from women who have been rolling bidis for 20 years! And of course, they still claim all the rejected bidis. The findings of a study done by a voluntary organisation on bidi workers in Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh, were shared with the Commission. They revealed the typical carving away of Women's wages through fraud :

Daily expenses/losses under contract system:

Tendu leaf shortage	Rs. 1.20/1000 bidis (average)
Tobacco shortage	Rs.0.60/1000
Deduction Rs. 2/week	Rs.0.30/1000
Rejected bidis	Rs.0.50-2/1000
Thread costs	Rs.0.15/1000
Daily loss total	Rs.2.75-4.25

Minimum Wage in M.P.	Rs. 10.50/1000 bidis (1 day's work)
Contractor's Stated wage	Rs. 7.10/1000
Amount Actually Received After Deduction—Rs 4.7/1000	

The Commission met these kinds of reports in every state where they visited bidi rollers. They found women usually receiving about half of the minimum wage under these ploys. Because the primary employer does not want to comply with the requirements of the law, he is virtually impossible to trace. Most women work for two or three different contractors at a time. They are not asked to sign when they receive payment. They are registered, so the employer will not have to provide maternity benefits. They change the falsified name every few months. They deduct provident fund from the women's wages, but give no receipts. In Tamilnadu, only 20% of the collected provident funds are officially recorded—half under bogus names.

In the Vellore siume to Tamilnadu there is a city of 20,000 homebased bidi workers. One woman, Rukmani, said that they get 1 kg. tobacco from the contractor who expects 1500 bidis in return. They only can make 1250 bidis out of this amount of raw material. The rate is of Rs. 11.60/1000 bidis, but because they have to replenish the shortfall, they make only Rs. 8-9/day. The men go to the mandi to buy the raw material, so the women have demanded a separate cell where they can go to buy it themselves.

Another woman who works with her in the slum is Gulzar Begum. She said she has difficulty supporting her family on Rs. 8/day, so she often has to take loans from the money-lender. He charges her Rs. 1/day on a Rs. 10 loan. She said that her children—and most of the children of bidi workers—start rolling bidis by the age of five years. She also complained that T.B. was rampant amongst them.

Lalitha is one of the women who labels the bidi packets. She does the work at home, and usually labels 10,000 packets per day. She is paid 40 paise/1000 labels, but she has to buy her own gum and thread, so she actually earns only 30 paise/1000, or Rs. 3/day. She also borrows at Rs. 1/day on Rs. 10. During an economic crisis, she had to give her daughter to the contractor for a loan of Rs. 350. The daughter was required to go and work at his place everyday from 6 a.m., for the entire day. Because so little food is given, the children have to carry their own. They do special jobs like folding the corners of the bidi at the rate of Rs. 1.50/1000. Out of this meagre amount, 50 paise are deducted as the interest of the loan.

Lalitha got her daughter freed of this "bonded labour" by taking a loan from the Malir Mangalam women's organization, which she had joined, and paid the contractor off. This organisation has helped many other women relieve the contracts on their young children after reports came that these children were beaten and abused in this master's house.

Another labeller, Savitri, also has great difficulty supporting her family. She does double work each day so that she can earn Rs. 10. Her husband was drinking half of her wages each day until he died of alcoholism. "Some days I cannot even buy rice!" she sobbed. "And if we demand more wages, the contractor will stop our work!"

The women's organisation there runs this loans/savings unit where the Commission members met some children who had been "bonded". Raghu's mother had taken a loan Rs. 300 which forced him into the work of folding 15,000 bidis a day. 'Children's fingers are small and pointed, and so especially good for this delicate task'. He earned Rs. 6/day, from which Rs. 4 were deducted as repayment to the loan. He complained of backache and T.B. He looked about 13. He now studies in the morning at the centre run by the organization.

When other children heard him telling his story, they started bragging to the Commission members, "I can label 20,000 in one day!!" Another said he was working off a Rs. 2000 loan his mother took.

Then the group leaders of the bidi workers complained strongly to the Commission about the insulting behaviour of sub-contractors. "They all treat us unfairly, and it is a lot of trouble working for two or three different contractors in one week."

The priorities of these women were: access to regular work, and access to health facilities. They all had ration cards.

In Madhya Pradesh the Commission found that women were also under this kind of wage constraints, but had been so brainwashed by the contractors that they often accepted the exploitation unconsciously. Even if they actually received only Rs. 4 after all the contractor's deductions, they would answer "Rs. 7" when the Commission asked about their wages. In a village 20 km. from Jabalpur, a community of Muslim women were engaged in bidi work. They looked extremely poor. All were afraid of the contractors.

One woman, Fatamabi, told the Commission that her children help her at rolling work. Her 11-year old daughter can roll 300 bidis every day. Fatamabi complained of the perpetual shortage of tobac-

co, bad leaves, and high rate of rejection 200/1000. She said her payment is often delayed by 2-3 weeks. Her singature is never taken, and she is not given a log book. Her identity card was given to her in her son's name. There is no medical clinic near the village. She said they had heard about a medical van for bidi workers, but no one has seen it yet. When the Commission asked her about bonus, housing, scholarships, and minimum wage, she answered, "No..No..No..No.." It was difficult to compute her real wage because of all the complex deductions, but it seemed to be Rs. 5/1000. She was one of 30 bidi rollers in the compound of the Panchayat who reported similar hardships. Their priorities were 'no cheating' by the employers, and 'please' health services!

In another village in this district, Sihora 100 bidi workers gathered to meet the Commission. They have been rolling bidis for 50 years in the village, yet there is no history of a union or even a sporadic hartal, despite the fact they earn less than Rs. 4/day. All of them are landless. Here too, the identity cards are in the names of men. They complained that their employers would not sign on the scholarship forms for their children (under the welfare rules) and the teachers also charges Rs. 5 per form for a signature. A mobile medical van does come to this village, but only irregularly, and it charges Rs. 3 for an injection and Rs. 2 for medicines. The women were afraid at this meeting, and one said, "Since we have met you today and talked, we may not get work for next 15 days". If they are this vulnerable, how will they ever get the contractor to comply with the legislation, that is supposed to protect them?

In another town the Commission met with bidi workers who have been struggling to establish a cooperative for almost two years. They told the Commission their woes of registration in detail. Their chief organizer began the story:

"When we started holding group meetings to discuss the possibility of starting a co-op of 500 women, the contractors refused to give work to us. Our husbands did not support our idea because they had no faith in our seriousness in this venture. We got exhausted by answering hundreds of queries put before us by the funding department. Then the building...

"We selected, one in the big market complex which had been lying vacant for the last two years. But when we demanded it, the Municipal authorities showed total apathy. Some official had been arrested for corruption, or something like that, so they did not pay any attention to us. The matter was not raised at the board meeting, so no decision could be made. We did not know how to get

things done.

"Finally some bureaucratic pressure was exerted from above, and a favourable decision was given. We were glad. In the meantime, the Chairman of the Board changed. Then we learned that the decision to allot that building to us was not recorded in the minute of the Board meeting. 'How do we know that was decided? What can we do?' the other bureaucrats said.

"Again, some pressure was applied from the state government, so we finally got the building. But then, the problems of registration began!

At this point, the field worker took up the story, "Numerous forms had to be filled out. It was very tedious. For a 20-member society, a total of 600 signatures had to be collected! Then all these thumb impressions had to be further attested. Oh, I did not know that! They should have told me before, at last all the forms were completed and we submitted them to the Department. After one month the Inspector came and asked us to do alterations in the bye-laws. We did everything. Yet a few weeks later, a list of queries were sent. Our chief organizer answered them all clearly. Still no action was taken. Throughout this whole process no one took us seriously. We would do our part, then everything would stop. It finally dawned on us. 'Aahha! We have not made bribes and gifts. We would not.' Again we had to bring bureaucratic pressure from Bhopal.

"Within minutes, the co-op. was registered. But still minor harassments continued."

The chief organizer said, "One day, the Inspector came at 4.30 p.m., and insisted on verifying all the members. They had to be collected from their homes. Another Inspector refused to submit the report until he was 'satisfied'. Attempts to collect bribes still continue, and there is no secret about it.

"Once they realized that bribes were not coming from these women, they resorted to other strategies. Excuses like 'officer transferred', 'substitute on leave' or 'peon's bicycle broken', and many others. Thus everything kept being delayed

"Then the Inspector were also trying to use the facilities at the Project Office for their personal work, like getting their typing done free of cost.

"Then our experience with the Cooperative Bank was also disappointing. Though six accounts were opened, the efficiency was intolerable."

One member of the proposed co-op, who was at the meeting said, "First of all nobody believes that it is a genuine society-not even the Cooperative Department. They refused to work without bribes and harass us in every possible way. Secondly, there are too many unnecessary rules and procedures for getting registered. Thirdly, when the Inspectors become disgruntled because we would not pay them off, they resorted to inciting our women against the cooperative. This raised doubts in the minds of many women and because of their past experiences with fraud and deceit in the outside world, it was easy to believe they might be cheated again.

"You see-the Government acts negatively on one side. The contractors and the inspectors who get bribes from them spread negative messages on the other side. How can one small group of women survive in this environment? The culture of our town is full of goondaism. Nothing honest can work in our city."

The chief organizer concluded the story by saying, "Until today, our problems of production have not been solved. We have yet to get the licence from the excise department, and after that there is the sales tax number. Who knows what harassments are in store for us?

"All of our enthusiasm for having our own production unit has vanished. We have become the laughing stock of the city, and we feel strangulated. But even without enthusiasm, we will not give up. You will see us making bidis from this place!"

After this meeting the Commission met with the Madhya Pradesh State officials in Bhopal. They described to the Chief Secretary and the Labour Commissioner some of their tour observations. In this discussion, the problems faced by bidi workers came up. The Labour Commissioner was familiar with these problems. He immediately joined the discussion, saying, "Yes, these bidi traders are so strong, so wealthy-the workers are too weak to fight them. What can we even do? The workers cannot bear the loss of income or work for even a few days. The traders are so wealthy and so stubborn, they are willing to keep the shops closed for months together."

One Commission member said, "Then what is the answer? If you cannot enforce legislation, if they are so powerful, what is the answer for these women?"

"They should form a cooperative," he replied.

"Will the government be ready to sell their bidis (like they do for handloom co-op)?" she asked.

"How! The government could not sell bidis!" he said.

"If the government think they are not strong enough to fight these traders, you think these women can fight them!" she asked.

Some unionized bidi workers whom the Commission met had come closer to achieving fair labour practices for themselves than the unorganized women. One such example was encountered in Ahmedabad city in Gujarat. Godavari Padmashali, the President of 4500-member union said, "After seven years of union agitation, we have reached up to the wages of Rs. 12/1000 bidis. Still this is short of the minimum wage, which is Rs. 13.40. Here, at least, all the members have I.D. Cards, access to the medical centre, scholarships, and other welfare services. And there is going to be a housing colony for 200 members of the union, assisted by CSWB and HUDCO.

"The worst thing is this 'sale-purchase' system the employers are beginning to adopt. Once again they will evade giving us any benefits. How can we catch the 'choti' of the principal employers? He is not to be seen anywhere!?"

This sale-purchase system refers to a new practice that the Commission saw gaining ground in Rajasthan and M.P., as well as where it started from Gujarat. It entails the women actually 'purchasing' the raw materials from the contractor. When her bidis are rolled, she 'sells' them back to the same contractor. The system will reject up to 30% of her products; of course, the contractor still appropriates then reject (despite the fact that she owns the raw materials); and it relieves itself from all responsibility for fair labour practices prescribed under law.

One woman in Mehsana district, Kulsumbibi, described the evils of this system in their village of Patan. "We only get Rs. 6 or 7 for a thousand bidis when we sell them back to the 'Thekedar' (contractor). He receives Rs. 22-23 for them! When they started this sale-purchase system, he tore up my I.D. Card."

One Commission member asked, "What about the union? Cannot they help you?"

She replied, "I am not allowed to join the union because the sub-contractor is my brother-in-law's brother-in-law, and they are our neighbours."

The women in Patan who are members of the union receive Rs. 10/1000, and they all have I.D. Cards.

Another trend which makes it difficult for the bidi workers to be organized in any fashion is the ever-increasing closure rate of factories. At Aurangabad in Ahmednagar district, Maharashtra, the

Commission met a depressed lot of 400 workers in one factory. They were getting Rs. 11/1000, but no creche or maternity benefits. (Actually, a 'creche' sign was hung over one room, but it was full of women rolling bidis and no children.) Every month Rs. 625 is taken from their wages in the name of the provident fund, but they have never been given a receipt for this. Now their employer is trying to push them out of the factory to work in their homes. Besides pushing them into their homes, they are encouraging the women to take up the business of sub-contracting to other women. So these women have begun earning Rs. 2/1000 bidi from others' labour, by applying the same practices they know so well from their own sub-contractor.

An old woman, Sakubai, said she had once seen 2000 workers in her factory. Today there are only 25.

"Where have they all gone?" a Commission member asked.

"Home", she replied, promptly.

A Pune woman, Vijaya Jagannath gave a similar report. She said that in the last 14 years, all the Pune factories but one have closed down. She is working in this one, and receives Rs. 11/1000 bidis (min. wage Rs. 15.), but said that home workers were getting only Rs. 6-7/1000.

The Commission found rural women reporting the most oppressive circumstances.

In Panagar village, Janpad panchayat, M.P., women reported earning Rs. 3-4 per day. When they demanded higher wages, the contractors stopped giving work for 15 days. It was only thanks to the local Free Legal Aid Committee which intervened, that the workers were reinstated. The FLAC came to know about the problem from a junior officer whose mother's work had stopped.

The contractor of the bidi rollers belongs to their own caste, so they cannot speak out against him. If women have I.D. cards, they are in the names of their sons or some unknown males. One woman here told the Commission, "I have been rolling bidis since I was eight."

Tribals in M.P. fare even worse. In Raipur district they are paid Rs. 2.50/1000, and their children get Rs. 1.25. Often they are not paid at all. They organized a 'marcha' of 300 workers, but have not seen any result yet.

Some of these tribals collect tendu leaves for bidi production. The Forest Development Corporation rate is Rs. 8/100 leaves, but usually when the women walk the long distance to the depot to sell

their collections, they find it closed.

"Even if they are open, they usually make some excuse and ask us to wait or come next time," one woman complained. "Then we are forced to sell them to the trader at a very low rate."

They also told the Commission that this same trader buys other forest items like 'chironjee'—a very expensive spice that sells for Rs.60/kg. in the market—from the tribals by bartering the same quantity of salt!

A tribal from the Sabarkantha district sells the tendu leaves she collects at the rate of Rs.7/5000 leaves. She has no idea about their market value. She said there is no advantage in selling them to the Forest Development Corporation as it also offers very low rates, and is far from their village. She is a member of a Forest Workers Union. She said her priority was a fair price for the leaves. The Commission asked her, "Could you roll bidis if the tobacco powder was supplied to you?"

She replied, "No! we are the birds of the open sky, we cannot sit home for long hours everyday. The day I do not see the face of Jungledada (Fatherforest), food has no taste for me! Instead of tobacco, give us cows!"

A Rajasthani tribal woman from Madu village believes conditions are better for those people selling leaves in Gujarat. She only receives Rs.3 per day for 1000 leaves. "If I had my way, I would go to the border of Gujarat and sell them where they pay a better price."

Usually, though, this theory works in reverse. The reality is that if a contractor can pay some other labourer less wages, he will take the work or buy supplies there. Women in Gujarat often said they could not agitate for higher wages, because the contractors would simply take the work over the state borders where desperate women will take up the work at an even lower rate.

It is revealing to look into some of the women's personal circumstances, to understand from what level of motivation they are operating. In Jabalpur city many women are supporting their entire family solely on bidi wages. Twenty-one years old Shakila is one woman trying to support her nine-member family on this small amount. Her parents are very old, and there is no brother in the family. When all her six sisters help, they can earn Rs.13/day. She is unusual in the community because she is educated up to B.A. IIIrd year. She also runs Adult Education classes, but in three years she has only been remunerated three times, a very small amount, with no allowance for class rent or electricity charges. She is not unusual

in her frustrations, though: "I feel so angry about receiving such low wages, but I am helpless. I cannot afford to be angry, much less to strike."

Amongst Jabalpur bidi families, the child mortality rate of children under two years is as high as 26.5% in the Muslim community and 23% in the Hindu community. Sixty-two per cent school age children go to school, the rest drop out to roll bidis and help the family. Forty-five per cent of these families earn less than Rs.400/month. The 24% who earn more than Rs.700 do so because there is a man in the family with a permanent job, or because they are nine member or larger families, with everyone working in bidi production. Families with more children earn a higher income not per capita, but their gross income amounts to more. Sixty per cent of these families depend solely on their bidi wage for survival. Fifty per cent are illiterate, but they all aspire to educate their children. Sixty-one per cent own their kutchra houses, but 91% have no savings.

Their health is poor, Twenty per cent are seriously ill with asthma or T.B. or bronchitis. Forty per cent have been sterilized, but they report post-sterilization problems of excessive bleeding, severe pain, and irregular menstrual cycles. Most of them suffer from anaemial bodyaches, an dizziness from constant exposure to the tobacco dust.

The Union that serves these women presented a memorandum to the Commission, outlining their complaint which are violating the law. It was one of six such memorandums which the Commission received from Jabalpur, Bombay, Nipani, Ahmednagar, Ahmedabad and Pune. Besides, calling their employers on the shortages of raw materials, lack of legitimate records, lack of welfare benefits, unreasonable rejection rate, and the illegal contract system, each memorandum mentioned some complaint specific to their area.

The Tirunelveli District Bidi Workers Union not only blamed the three "tycoons"—Ganesh, 30 Number Photo, and Sadhu bidi industries, but also complained against the Karnataka Labour department. They claim that the Labour Department is in absolute collusion with the manufacturers, and therefore will not take any action for all the frauds they perpetuate against bidi workers. Their main plea was to stop the contract system altogether, and reinstate workers' legal rights. One problem they mentioned about women being registered in a brother's or husband's or son's name was that when the supposed man or boy died, the women could then no

longer get work. And if any provident funds were granted, they went to all of the dead male's male relatives, and the woman worker never saw any of it.

The Nipani memorandum was adamant about closing down the Kiran Tobacco Company—a factory where mechanized equipment is displacing tobacco processors from their much needed jobs. The Commission visited the old factory in Nipani, where about 200 workers were employed. They receive Rs.13/day—the minimum wage. The women operated big and small machines which cut and grade the tobacco. They were articulate, knowledgeable workers, who had been union members for ten years. They spoke with unanimous consent about how the numbers of women and the amount of work had declined since these machines had arrived.

Radhabai Patil, the local union leader confirmed that now there is only seven to eight months of work, while they used to get twelve. Besides the mechanization, the factory has begun to farm out work to rural areas, at much lower wages. One woman complained, "We middle-aged women are under constant pressure to submit our resignation."

At a later meeting with these union members in the Municipal Councillors' Meeting Hall, other trade groups as well as representatives of employers were present. These employers' representatives claimed that the working conditions had improved due to mechanization, "because all the dust from hammer-beating was now eliminated".

The women all said, "No, that is not true. Because of the machines the tobacco dust blows all around and gets in our lungs." This was the first of many heated arguments.

The employers complained that bidi production is decreasing because of loose and unbranded bidis made available in the market, so they are unable to give employment round the year. (Three has been a 35% retrenchment since 1985.)

Disagreement also followed this, and one worker asked angrily, "Why is it that there was always full time work until we got organized into a union? Why not now? Why has it been announced 'seasonal' now?" The women are suspicious that their work has been farmed into less organized sectors.

It was raining heavily outside, and Radhabai Patil stood up to present the workers' memorandum. She told the gist of it to the meeeting: "Close down the Kiran Tobacco Company which is a 'Rakshasa' demon who will wipe out the entire working force in

Nipani. The machines must be made so costly by taxes that the employers cannot afford them. Why should the Government fund such machines that render us unemployed?"

The Commission visited the place in Gujarat where these notorious tobacco processing machines are made and sold. The visit was accorded them thanks to the Labour Commissioner who travelled with the Commission throughout the state. (Gujarat was the only state where the government had turned the Commissions programme over to the Labour Department, instead of the Social Welfare Department). The machines are set up and operating in the 'Shrirang' factory in Vallabhvidyanagar, Kaira district. Their technician said that this machines can triple the production capacity of a manual worker.

The Commission reached the factory at 7 a.m., and saw all the men and boy workers. This factory had 61 male workers. If the processing were hand done, it would employ 250 female workers. The production was not in full swing. It looked like their interest in this plant was mainly to sell the machines, not actual production. They have sold these machines to Kiran in Nipani, and probably other places in Maharashtra. Because of the Nipani Union and the Labour Ministry's concern, they were feeling agitated.

The technician angrily said, "One Nipani union (cursing them) has made a big issue of it, and now we have visitors all the time. Why do you not go to district Baroda where there is a completely automatic machine?"

When the Commission was in this district, they also visited some manual tobacco processors of Chikodra village. There are many such factories in the Anand taluka. Women there earn Rs.7/day for working from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Before, they earned only Rs.5, but they joined a union and raised a demand for Rs.10/day, so they stopped the factory. After a 10-month legal battle, they were reinstated for Rs.7. One woman working there, Shantaben, complained that her son had been fired from work in the fields because she had participated in the union activities.

"Why, your son? What did he had to do with it?" a Commission member asked.

"Ha! The same people own the tobacco fields, the tobacco factories, the bidi shops. Not just here, but all over India. They are all relatives. How can we ever deal with them?"

HOMEBASED OCCUPATIONS

Handlooms: Weavers, Spinners

Geeta is a master weaver of West Bengal's famous Tangail saris. She is somewhat unusual in her village, because most of the master weavers there are men. She learned this skill from her father, because he was growing blind and she had no brother to learn it from him. She was sitting at her large pitloom as she told the Commission members her story and demonstrated her skill on the sky-blue sari she was working on. Because of economic pressures in her family, she began this weaving work when she was nine. She is literate, and she married into a weaver's family that does coarse weaving work. After her marriage (when she was 15) she taught her husband how to do this fine Tangail work. Now they have three sons and two daughters, and the eldest daughter (who is seventeen years old) helps them. She does the starching and warping. One of her sons weaves. They have three looms. Geeta, who is now 33, works every day from 8 a.m. to 9.30 p.m. She takes breaks from the weaving only to cook food or to prepare materials for weaving. The three weavers and one assistant can earn Rs.250/- week, collectively. They are not members of a weaving cooperative. She works for the "Mahajan", and owes him money for a loan, so she cannot join the cooperative. But she likes working for Mahajan. From him she could borrow the Rs.4000/- she needed. She has already repaid half of it.

She never leaves her weaving work, except during the last part of pregnancy. She was not enthusiastic for more training. She was smiling while she talked and while her shuttle was flying, but she seemed spent. "This work is so strenuous that without the economic pressures of continuing the work, nobody would like to do this work after doing it for five years. And training will not change the way these looms work." Her priorities instead were her children's education, and her daughters' marriage.

Geeta's situation is typical of that of many women who are part of weaving families. It is accepted within these communities that women may sit at the loom, but this usually only occurs when there is severe economic pressure to do so. If the male weaver of the family has died or is absent, it is easier for a woman to get access to the loom. This situation is apparent in Geeta's daughters' circumstances. She, like many women in weaving families, helps do all the preparation work—the sizing, the warping, the beam preparation. If she was in a Khadi-weaver's family she would also do the spinning. But she does not sit at the loom, because she has a brother. These pre-weaving material preparations are very time consuming

and are an essential part of a good quality finished product. Yet they pass unrecognized as a skill, and women get very little remuneration for doing any of these pre-weaving jobs.

Geeta's relationship to the cooperative also reveals a common attitude women weavers express. They cannot easily take loans from the cooperative, while the money lender extends such services to them readily. Also, the trader pays a weaver promptly when he receives the cloth, while it might take several weeks of delay if she was selling through the cooperative. Another big problem for women weavers in relation to the cooperatives is that many weavers' cooperatives do not accept women members. Or, if they do, they often do not recognise a woman as a weaver if she only practises the pre-weaving skills of warping, sizing, dyeing and spinning. Thus she remains ineligible for cooperative benefits despite her large participation in the weaving process. At the same time, no matter which jobs she does, she can deal with the trader itself.

In Geeta's community of 70,000 Tangail weavers who are mostly refugees from Bangladesh, 15% of the women are actually weavers. All the women do the preparatory work of sizing, warping and dyeing. Forty per cent of the weavers in Phulia were members of cooperatives. But to become a member you must meet the precondition of owing your own loom. Very few women do. Two cooperatives the Commission visited here had 25% women listed on their membership register. When the Commission asked some women whose names were listed, they said they did not know they were cooperative members.

Kalyani was under a tree outside her house, almost in the street, when the Commission members walked by. She was squatting, vigorously kneading cooked rice into enough cotton yarn to make one sari. This is the Tangail sari's speciality. People say "the starch will remain until the sari dies!" about these saris. It is a difficult job to work the 200 grams of rice into every fibre of the 250 grams of yarn. She said she was "only helping" her husband, as she showed the Commission members her soaked, cracked palms. She said, "I'd like to learn weaving, but only if someone else could take up my other work. At least weaving is less strenuous than this."

Most women do not feel as positive about their trades as Geeta did. Another young woman from her village, Basanti Ghosh, weaves cotton shoulder bags on her small hobby loom and sells them to the Mahajan. She makes Rs.3/bag, and could weave upto 3-1/2 bags daily, but Mahajan does not give her that much raw material. So she usually earns about Rs.5. Her landless parents are very old

and weak, so she is bound to this weaving work out of economic necessity. She learned it from her aunt. She studied up to the 10th. She has five brothers and one sister. The oldest brother goes to college and works part time in a shop for Rs.50/month. The other brothers go to school. She is not willing to go to school because she has to look after her ailing mother and their cows.

In Chakkalan village, Punjab, the Commission met 75 women durrie weavers who work at home, completely dependent on their trader. Even their looms belong to him, for which he charges rent. No one dares to take a loan for her own loom because one woman did this, and the trader subsequently stopped giving her work. She had to sell the loom in order to repay the loan. Their durries are sold in Ludhiana, but they could not tell the Commission how they were paid, the calculation is so complicated. They earn around Rs.10-15 per durrie. They all looked depressed.

In a Bihar meeting in Patna, the Commission heard from Draupadi that the monsoon is a difficult time for the tassar weavers from Saliganj village, because they cannot get either yarn or cocoons. She did not know where her cocoons came from. One woman there told the Commission, "I get Rs.5/metre for reeling the yarn and weaving the cloth from it. There are 12 metres of running fabric, but the trader deducts one metre as a rule. He says it shrinks when washed. But that is not my fault." Her priority is more and regular work—a common request from women working for traders.

In Perujanaickenpalayam, Coimbatore district, the Commission met women weavers at a meeting. Six of the 16 weavers were cooperative members, but they complained that the cooperative gave them overly complicated designs. When they failed to produce them well, their wages were cut. They like to weave simple borders. Their looms were on rent (Rs.30-80/month). They get the benefit of a government scheme which gives them one electric bulb at the rate of Rs.1/month. One woman commented about this, saying "It helps men—they work more than us."

A Commission member asked, "Why?"

"There is only one loom."

They are ready to weave if they can get a separate loom. But many said they could not afford to join the cooperative. The average income is Rs.300/month, and cooperative shares are Rs.251/-. Also, because of irregular cooperative payment, women often have to work for both the cooperative and the trader.

Sixty out of 360 members are women (17%), but none go to

attend the annual General Body meeting. "Are there any women on the cooperatives' managing committee?" one Commission member asked.

"No! But if we were, men would not be able to misuse the money. Women would talk out side the society and the men's secrets would be out!" one woman answered. All the women laughed.

This led into a discussion of cooperative/trader pros and cons. The society pays higher, but the delay is enormous (three months). The private trader gives lower wages, but very regularly.

"We have to wait till the payment is received from the State Handloom Corporation, and then all our transactions have to be by cheque," the society Secretary said. "And we do give loans, but members resent repaying them because we are associated with the government. When they take loans with private traders, they repay regularly."

But the women still did not agree that they could get loans easily at the cooperative. They argued, "The copperative should give loans, because their payments are so late. They have to understand our difficulties. And even though we have to pay the trader higher interest rates, we always get the loan. In the cooperative, we have to bribe so many of the officials, yet we still are not sure if we will get the loan. They are never timely loans!"

At Pochampalli, A.P., the Commission saw the famous tie and dye varieties of saris being woven. Thirty-five villages and 10,000 families are producing these saris which used to be made only for home consumption. Out of 750 cooperative members, only 20 were women. Their jobs are processing, bleaching, tying, dyeing, warping the yarn, and sitting at the looms as men's helpers. At Hyderabad there is an excellent weavers' training centre, "but women do not come for training. It is open to both, but they do not come," said the cooperative secretary.

"What about the general body meeting?" the Commission asked.

"Oh, they do not take interest. But we do not stop them," he answered.

"And loans?"

He answered that 350 members have taken loans, but never given to any woman member.

This cooperative was not offering one shred of active en-

couragement to help women benefit from their services.

Despite these kinds of difficulties, there is a lot of scope for positive action in the cooperatives. One example of this was encountered in the Dholaka block in Gujarat. There the Commission met Baluben, a traditional Harijan weaver of woollen blankets made from local sheep's wool, and sold locally to the shepherds. She had joined an agriculture workers union, but was not getting much benefit. So the union arranged for these weavers to upgrade their skills at the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad. With these better skills, they formed a women's cooperative, of which Baluben is the Chairperson. She herself earns about Rs.600/month now, because she is a good weaver and designer.

But she is not happy, because only 10 of their 60 members have regular work. They mainly weave for the State Handloom Corporation, which supplies wool mixed with marino. They mainly weave shawls from this. The raw material supply is irregular, but their payments are fair and regular. They also produce shawls on their own, but they lack working capital and cannot afford to stock the things till winter.

Through this cooperative Ramila, a Bhangi girl, got a loan to buy herself a loom. She also got training there to upgrade her skill. But she still has two problems which are more difficult for the cooperative to help her solve: There is a lack of space in her house for the loom; and her father has appropriated her loom and asks her to use his pitloom. She cannot produce the shawls of required quality on that loom. Lack of space is a problem for 22 of the 25 women who have acquired looms on loan. The cooperative is negotiating to get assistance under the scheme for a workshed for Harijans.

"I will never be satisfied until all my members have full work," Baluben told the Commission.

The raw material supply and sufficient workspace for a loom are major production constrictions for weaving women all over the country. Tieups with markets and receiving fair payment are their major distribution difficulties. In some places, women are weaving designs which already command a large market, like the Tangail saris, or Kangri shawls from Kashmir, or the Tassar cloth of Bihar. Other women feel the large rift between their traditional cloth weaving and marketable handlooms.

Assamese women are very competent and skilled weavers. Their traditional shawls and skirts are composed of intricately woven designs. Yet, they have not been successful in marketing

these. They do not know consumer preferences, or how to incorporate their traditional designs into marketable items. Weavers' cooperative have not solved their problems. Usually the women work like this: a customer gives a woman yarn for three towels. She weaves them, giving two to the customer, retaining one for herself, as payment. Because it is difficult to sell their products, the banks are not willing to give them loans. And due to the heavy rains in Assam, it is imperative that they have a dry, covered place for their looms so that their products will not get spoiled.

Many Mahila Samitis offer weaving programmes, but the women said, "Weaving is only good for our home consumption—it has not succeeded in giving us any income."

The story was similar in other parts of the North-East. Women in Nagaland said they want design guidance. "We want to make things suitable to modern taste which still use our traditional design work," said a spokeswoman from a group of women running a textile unit. They suggested training in natural dyeing, and like women everywhere, demanded, "a reasonable price for yarn and assured market and supply of raw materials". Now they get Rs. 7/day, plus food and accommodation for making shoulder bags.

In Manipur, the same demands were made. And here the Commission was told that there are 50,000 women in Tangkhul area alone. It takes ten days to weave a beautiful Naga shawl which is sold for Rs. 200. The women receive Rs. 10/day labour wage, if and when the shawl is sold. Women pleaded for looms to be made available for the really poor women. They complained loudly about the corrupt practices in loan sanctioning.

The Commission saw a strange situation in Phutzero, Nagaland. There 10-15 young women work at a weaving centre run by the Rural Development Department. The workshed, looms and raw materials are supplied to them for weaving woollen shawls. The weavers neither get a share in the sale profits, nor a labour wage. Their labour was supposed to be "shram-daan" —a donation to the society that will "later" be used for development work. Perhaps the women considered the training as their remuneration?

In both Himachal Pradesh and Rajasthan, women complained about the recent TRYSEM thrust on weaving training, but with no concurrent access to raw materials or markets. Thus it was basically useless training. Women who received training in Renuka, H.P. for carpet weaving three years ago still have no work.

In Kashmir the Commission met 3-10 young women weaving shawls at a centre affiliated with the State Handloom Corporation,

though it is owned privately. They weave the intricate Kangri shawls from 8 a.m.- 8.p.m. daily, and receive Rs. 400-500/month. The shawls they produce sell for up to Rs. 1000 each. None of the weavers had ever gone to school, because they had always needed the income from their work.

The Commission received mixed reports on women weavers who were organised into cooperatives or societies. In Calcutta, at the Voluntary Agencies meeting, one organizer said he had been trying to register a cooperative for three years, to no avail. The condition for registration is that each member owns a loom. "But that is the purpose of bringing them together in a cooperative," he said, "to enable them to acquire assets, like looms." Their morcha and one hunger strike have not had any effect.

A tribal woman, Kesarbai, was managing a two-year-old weaving centre in Kanba village, Dungarpur district, Rajasthan. She learned to read and write in the local centre run by a social organization. Then she learned weaving. Now she and 15 other women earn about Rs.380/month, weaving cloth at a rate of Rs. 4/metre. They have started a savings fund of Rs. 2500 from which they give revolving loans. Kesarbai expressed the opinion heard over and over again when she said, "We prefer working in a common shed to working at home, because we can be more productive, and help each other too."

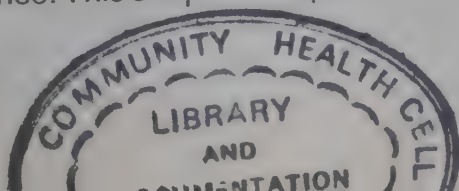
In Punjab, carpet weavers working in a private centre in Raja Sansi, district Amritsar, thought their organisational problems would be solved if they could form cooperatives under the government. Then they thought they would receive fair wages. Now they get Rs. 7/day from the trader who owns the centre. He also owns all the looms they use, which cost about Rs. 1000 each. Kuljeet weaves borders on carpets here for Rs. 5-7-/day, but the work is not available regularly. Her husband is ill and this wage is the only income on which the family survives.

Preetam is a widow, and because her three sons are earning, she cannot get a pension, despite the fact they are not helping her. These women all wanted regular work and fair wages, "We must earn Rs. 400-500/month."

In another Punjab village, Bungal, in Gurdaspur District the Commission visited DWACRA Projects. Two groups are doing pashmina carding, spinning and weaving in separate villages. A shop of their products is owned by a man selling other shawls. He has given them help on their designs and said he does not mark the shawls up at all from the weavers' price. This shop has helped these

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DWACRA women have a market.

They earn about Rs.17/shawl. Some earn Rs.400-500/month but for all the members to earn that much they need capital. The bank might grant a loan, but as they do not have an assured market, they refuse to borrow.

In Kanchipuram, T.N., there is a women weavers' cooperative society, but its governing board was recently taken over by the government. The women were not sure why. They must have gone too deeply in debt. Only two of the members were weaving on their own. The rest employed other women for weaving at a salary of Rs.100/month. They said they prefer children even more, because they learn faster. They said they had formed their own society "because in most cooperatives, they will not take women as members."

The low wages women weavers are receiving all over the country are high by the standards of what the spinners or women who do the preweaving preparation are receiving. There are 100 pashmina spinners at Ganderbad in Kashmir. Most of them earn Rs. 60-90/month for spinning the most costly yarn India produces. Azra is now an old woman, and she has been doing this work since she was four. One window, Sarva, said she buys local pashmina from a local trader at the rate of Rs. 30 for 30 grams. After spinning, she sells it back to him for Rs.60. It is one week's work of spinning 10 hours a day. She does this all year round. None of the 100 women thought they could form a cooperative because they are illiterate, and none were aware of the market price the middleman was getting for this.

In the Gurdaspur DWACRA project, women earn Rs.100-150/month for sorting the wool. These women are not agricultural labourers, and do not have any other sources of income. "Only those who have their own land work on the land here," one woman explained.

Some women in Bihar who are receiving Rs.5/metre for weaving tassar cloth begin with raw cocoons. This wage includes boiling, reelings or spinning, and the weaving. Those who only do the processing and reeling work receive Rs.1.50-Rs. 4/day. There are 3000 women doing this work in Varsaliganj village. The trader had been paying them Rs.1.50/day for spinning, until they organized into a union. After staging a "Sammelan" and putting forth their demands, he relented and gave them a 15 paise raise in wage. Needless to say, the women still do not think it is enough.

In Bhagalpur, Bihar, 90% of the tassar reelers are Muslim

women in disadvantaged positions, at the mercy of the traders' conditions for work. They have organized into a union which is training to upgrade their skills so that they can produce specific kinds of high quality yarns--Katai, Royal, Kukru, and Matka. Their aim is to eliminate middlemen, and their demands were these:

(1) Fixing of minimum wages for spinners and reelers by the Labour Department.

(2) Each woman should own a Charkha.

The organization has so far provided big charkhas to 25 women and small ones to 45 women, from a revolving fund. The women pay back Rs. 20-25/month.

Without charkhas, women have to do the reeling work on their bare inner thigh, just above the knee. The Commission observed the painful results of this in Kosa centre, Madhya Pradesh, where women had open sores from the reeling. They told the Commission members they could only continue to work until the sores got too painful. Then they would wait until they had healed again, somewhat, before resuming work.

In Tamilnadu's Kanchipuram district women do all the critical preparation for the actual weaving process. If working as an employee, men weavers get Rs. 10/day and women get Rs.2—this includes, reeling, warping, sizing, dyeing, and fixing the beam. If a lot of zari work is involved, men get Rs.20, but women *still* get Rs.2, despite the fact that they help set the design and also sit at the loom with the weaver.

The women here wanted to be members of the society, though only their men now belong. They had their hopes set on the bonus and dividends each member receives as a result of their work.

In Coimbatore district, village Kuruchi, 30 women are spinning on Ambar charkhas. They make 40 paise per hank of yarn. They can produce 20 hanks daily, or about Rs.8. They complained of headaches from the constant clacking of the charkhas. They get a yearly bonus of Rs.150. And "Once a year we have a General meeting, with lunch, and big people come from and give us advice." One woman spinner proudly told the Commission.

"What advice?"

Silence.

Then all the spinners exchanged glances.

Then giggling.

"We do not remember."

Handicrafts

Kondereddi Laxmi is one of 60,000 lacemakers in and around Narsapur, Andhra Pradesh. She is one of a large community of Kshatriyas, whose women do not go out to work. She begins her day each morning at 4 a.m., does housework. By 6 a.m. she begins the lacemaking. At 1 p.m., she rests for one hour. From 2 p.m.-10 p.m. she continues her industrious looping, pulling, crocheting of simple thread into delicate lace. By doing this for 12-15/hrs. each day, she can complete one reel in four days. She earns Rs.6-8 for these four days of work. Because her husband divorced her eight years ago, she has to support herself and five children on this income. She herself studied up to the 8th standard, now her three girls and two boys are all studying and helping with the housework. Although she did not say so, some of them must be earning small wages or begging outside. Otherwise, how could all six of them be surviving on less than Rs. 2/day?

She used to work on a piece-rate basis for the contractor but her earnings were even lower. Now she purchases the reel for Rs. 15/-, makes the lace, and sells it to the trader, usually for Rs. 23/-. This piece bought at Rs.23 is exported at Rs. 150, without any additional labour performed on it, except packaging. Eighty to ninety per cent of the lace is exported.

Many other women from her village are earning only Rs. 1/day, because it takes them seven days to complete a reel. They can only find eight hours a day to work on it, instead of 15, like Kondereddi Laxmi finds.

Her case illustrates the central issues of home-based workers all over the country. They are both literally and officially invisible. They work in their home, so no one sees their labour. And they are not protected by any kind of labour legislation, so they receive abysmally low wages and no benefits. They do not even have the privilege of assured work even at this miserably low wage.

There are two types of home-based workers---artisans, and piece-rate workers. They almost universally sound the cry of "there is not enough work!" This can be interpreted several ways. For artisans it means they suffer access to raw materials. Many wood carvers, toy makers, and bamboo and reed workers, are suffering a loss of raw materials due to deforestation, or laws prohibiting the harvest of these products. Even if they can acquire the raw material, the cost prohibits their purchase, or makes the finished products too costly to command a very large market. For dona patta leaf plate makers, it is because the raw material is only seasonally available.

For weaver and potters who lack space, it means their work must halt during monsoons. For anyone involved in a decorative craft, their market is just by nature limited they produce non-necessity items. They are also badly affected by mechanization. Potters and coir workers are threatened by plastics. Changes in social custom are making traditional skills defunct. Tribals are no longer wearing only block prints or habitually carrying their printed roomals. Tie and dye is no longer purchased by all middle class Rajasthanis. Custom no longer dictates purchasing a certain kind of sari for wearing during mourning or at marriages. Certain wood carvings only sell in festival seasons. And the real crux of the problem lies in the sheer numbers of workers. Contractors only give sporadic work because the market is limited. And so many women want this work that they will accept a pittance — however erratically it is paid.

In an Ahmedabad meeting, the Commission heard evidence of the problems from many craftswomen. Nurjahan blockprints one bedsheet a day for a trader. She can do more than that, but there is no market. She used to help her mother print sheets, handkerchiefs, dhotis and saris of different types, but because of screenprint, she no longer gets this work. "I can print two chadars a day with my blocks," she told the Commission, "but with a screen, people can print at least 24 a day." Also, women like her used to print all the Adivasis, clothing. Now these men wear pants. She has to settle for only Rs. 2/day for her one sheet.

Sairabanu, the Vice-President of the Women's cooperative there, lamented this lack of market. "We specialize in vegetable dyes," she explained. "And after learning better production techniques, account keeping, store managing and sales, we have become more self-confident— but we are not economically better off."

Another woman at this meeting, Saraswati of the Bansfodia (meaning bamboo chippers) community mentioned about the non-availability of bamboo for her broom and basket making. "These days we have to buy our bamboo from the retailer at Rs. 12-15 per bamboo! He buys it at Rs. 3.50 directly from the forest. And the paper mills of Maharashtra, we hear, buy our bamboo at 26 paise each!" She said besides raw material, they really need space to work. Now they have to work on the footpath or on the road near their house. Then the neighbours lodge complaints and the police fine them. But they have no space in the house to keep the bamboo.

Their women's cooperative is lacking in management skills, but nonetheless they got a contract to supply brooms and baskets

to the government establishments because of a state resolution to give preference to women's cooperative to supply certain items. One member said, "If it was not for this resolution, the plastic industry would have all our business!"

Crafts people who rely on forest produce for raw materials are almost unanimously suffering losses. Udaipur bamboo workers prefer to buy from Bhils (tribals) who bring it from the forest illegally, because it is cheaper. While the Forest Corporation sold for Rs. 4-5 each, Bhils take Rs. 1.25-1.50 (And the Bhils are selling illegally because they get a better price from the Craftswomen than from the Forest Corporation). From 16 bamboos, they produce five baskets (one day's work), with a profit of Rs. 2/basket. They sell in the local market, but space is limited and police harassment is unrelenting. Because of this, they often walk to outlying villages and peddle their baskets there. Their priorities were a place in the market, and working capital.

Toy makers in Udaipur are up against two more serious disadvantages. The Kher wood which these 70 families use for covering their toys is rapidly becoming extinct due to deforestation. There is no new cultivation of Kher, and only in Madhya Pradesh are these still productive stands. Some of these women have had to turn to employment as domestic servants.

Seventy-five families in this area are involved in making leaf plates and bowls. Their business thrives during wedding season and hibernates during monsoon. They, like bamboo workers, buy direct from Bhils. They are unusual crafts people in that no middlemen are involved in their production. The customer comes to them to place orders, and they buy their raw materials directly from the collectors. Their problems lie in the lack of storage space for the leaves, in deforestation, causing decline of the crop, and in the seasonal nature of the market.

They pay Rs. 10-20 for one bunch of leaves depending on the season. From this amount they can market 500 leaf plates (pattel), which they can sell for Rs. 15, and 100 bowls (dona) for which they take Rs. 20. They say their only alternative to this traditional work is manual labour at Rs. 4-5/day.

People doing this same work in Bilaspur, H.P., are the villagers who were displaced by the Kangra dam. The five bighas of land they were given here is infertile, so dona pattel provides their sole income. Women can make 500-600 plates a day, for which they earn Rs. 30 (gross). But this is a seasonal income. They want loans or subsidy so they can buy a whole year's supply of leaves in season

and wrote them. In this way, they would not lack employment in any season.

Tamilnadu basket weavers in a Madras meeting said they have to bring their raw materials from Andhra Pradesh. They are originally S/T migrants from there. Once a year they go to Kandappa with their entire family and spend three months collecting reeds called 'ichemu'. For one truck-load they pay Rs. 6000/- for transport charges. A hundred families bring four to five loads, meaning each family has to have a working capital of at least Rs. 300/- plus its living expenses while the members are not earning.

They return to Tamilnadu, make baskets and sell street to street – the children, adults, everyone collecting, producing, hawking. Their problem is storage of these truck-loads of reeds. Police and the Municipal Corporation harass them for encroachment of the road. Their main demands were a workshop and loans.

Kerala reed workers are now forced to buy raw materials they used to harvest themselves. They pay Rs. 28/bunch, which lasts 3-4 days and nets about Rs. 35. They complained to the Commission that 75% of this reed goes to rayon factories and paper mills. The Forest Corporation will supply them with reed, but then they must sell their products there and their price is very low. They suggested that the Forest Corporation should use the profits they obviously make from their work, on welfare programmes for the reed workers.

Six Maharashtrian women from Jamkhed got a loan of Rs. 500/- through their local social organisation. They used it to buy the raw materials for their broom making at a power bulk price. Now they make and sell their brooms for Re. 1/each, both in the village market and to a cyclewallah who sells them in town. They have repaid their loan and said, "We are okay now, with this income."

Other women artisans who have troubles in acquiring their raw materials are carpenters, tinsmiths, junksmiths, and 'lifafa'(paper bag) makers. Many women involved in these occupations recycle old materials to produce their new ones. These used to be free for the collecting. Now they tell different stories.

Saraswati, from Pansodia, W.B., is a blacksmith. She and her husband travel between all the surrounding villages and market places to do work wherever they can find it. She wants iron scrap at a reasonable rate—this is their biggest constriction. Her husband makes Rs. 12/day while she earns Rs. 5. When there is not so much work available, she leaves him to smith for a higher wage, and she does agricultural labour.

Mira Tulsiram learned her carpentry skills from her family. Her mother a tin-smith who married into a carpenter's family. They were originally from Marwar migrated to Gujarat five decades back. She acquired her skills from both her mother and husband, and has taught her daughters in turn. They make small furniture out of scrap wood like fruit boxes. They collect from wholesale merchants in fruit markets, from chemists, and buy it retail from waste merchants. They make small things like stools, racks, small tables and kitchen equipment. As a routine they buy their raw materials on Tuesday, make the furniture from Wednesday to Friday; on Saturday they paint, polish and varnish. On Sunday they sell at Sunday Markets to poor and lower middle class families. On Mondays they do their housework and socialize before they begin again on Tuesday. The average family income from this is Rs. 300-500 p.m.

Some women involved in this work sell directly to shopkeepers. Others sell from village to village themselves. All of them said they need access to all their raw materials at wholesale or junk prices.

In this some Ahmedabad workers meeting, some junksmiths told about their work. They were strong women with muscular hands and large biceps, dressed colourfully. They do "thanda-garam" — cold and hot — work. 'Thanda' work is tinsmithing. From scrap iron, sheets and pipes, they make baskets, buckets, barrels, racks and cooking utensils. The majority of women do this. The 'garam' work of women is making chains of all sizes.

For both 'thanda' and 'garam' smiths, their major problem is raw materials. they currently have to buy from retailers, which is costly, because they sell their goods in poor peoples' markets. There is low purchasing power in these markets, hence a very low profit margin for themselves. But sales are not a problem. They can sell everything they make. They want these raw materials directly from their scrap source mills, big industrial plants, factories or godowns.

One Commission member asked, "Would you prefer new material to scrap?"

They thought a while and said, "No, we would prefer junk." Their average income from this work is Rs. 250/month, and several of them complained about their very temporary housing. from which they are often ousted.

A Bihari woman from Bhagalpur was at the Commission's Patna meeting, and she described the difficulties of getting the 'raddi' for her 'lifafa' (paper bag) making. "Now-a-days people sell

raddi!" Fatima said: " Even the crumpled pieces and small scraps from waste paper baskets. It used to be free!" She has sold her bags to grocers for many years to make her living. For the last five years this has become increasingly difficult, because she has to pay too much for the scrap paper. She sends her son to offices to collect raddi. " Sometimes he is successful, sometimes not. "

Textile artisans face slightly different problems. Their access to raw materials is often absolutely controlled by many middlemen, and their work is practically reduced to piece-rate as a result.

The Chikan workers in Lucknow, U.P., are a special example of how organizing has helped end exploitation they have suffered for decades.

The Commission visited the production centre run by a women's organisation for six years. Fifty women were involved in production and ten were under training. They concentrate on perfection of highly skilled embroidery which they work into kurtas, saris and dupattas. They sell to elite markets in urban areas. Their production is systematic.

All the women workers were from the Muslim community. Hasina told the Commission she had been doing this particular work for 40 years. " Before this centre, I got Rs. 5/- for this work. Now I get Rs.20/-. I have been to some of our exhibitions in big fancy cities, and now I realize the worth of our work."

Umarbaji said that women outside get 80 paise for embroidering one kurta, which is one day's work. " Their payments are full of cuts that we no longer face here."

Saira was a young girl, who has disabled legs. She told the Commission, " Before I came here, I was severely ill and depressed. I knew only one stitch. I joined training here, and now, I get to give training to other young girls!" The organizers helped her get a bicycle. She said her mother wears a burkha, but "I never will!"

It was apparent that the earnings had increased for all the members. The Secretary explained, though, how middlemen were spreading work out to villages, " at throwaway rates. " She pressed for land and greater government assistance in welfare programmes for her members.

Iraj Fatrana comes from her village over to the Lucknow centre to work. She is the only earning member of her family. She is organizing women to give up wearing the burkha. She described the operational chain of middlemen to the Commission.

" The Mahajan will give 500 saris for embroidery to a man who

will go on a cycle to different villages. He will give 50-100 saris to each of 10 or 12 houses. These men and women will distribute the saris in their own village. Each will have their cuts, you see! If there is a little stain on the sari the Mahajan will cut our wages. We try to reject stained cloths from the contractor, but they pressure us. Then we accept it, knowing we will get little or no income, just to prevent the 'wrath of the contractor', lest he stops giving us work totally."

Even women who do not work at the centre have found that traders prefer trained women. At the centre each woman learns all the stitches so that she can complete all the embroidery on one kurta without a changing hands. Thus she earns more and the contractor avoids stains, low quality, and the trouble of changing hands.

The chikan workers society's sales are good and they have an honest but uneconomical administration. They want to extend their services to more women, but they lack the necessary capital. They want soft loans to bolster their working capital and they want reservation of LDA housing scheme for chikan workers. "We suffer TB and we lose our eyesight because of the crowded housing and dark quarters in Muslim areas," Bajji said.

In a women's meeting in Rajkot, Gujarat, the Commission met embroiderers and bead workers who had not had the fortune of finding an elite market for their goods.

Sakina was the biggest entrepreneur of the bead workers present. She makes things like fancy tray covers, purses, dolls, photoframes and portraits. She refused to sell to the trader because she fears he will steal her designs and then commission them to other bead workers at lower rates. Thus she likes to sell directly to the customers, but her things pile up. She does not have enough direct contracts. She has come out of purdah for the sake of creating her own direct market.

A quiltmaker at this same meeting told about her work. It takes her two days to make a quilt, which she usually does at home unless the customers specifically request her to make them at their houses. She gets some advance for buying the cotton, the cloth and quiltcover from a fixed shop. She charges Rs. 45 per quilt, earning about Rs. 300/month. Her husband does not work and her son is "out of line". Her daughter looks after the housework. She first stepped out of the house against her husband's will, but now he is cooperative. The constant work with cotton irritates her throat. She suffers from asthma in the winter.

Jijiben does traditional embroidery and patchwork which she learned from her mother, and then changed and developed her own

learned from her mother, and then changed and developed her own as time passed. She said that the shopkeeper who she does work for likes her designs, but does not pay enough. "I want my own shop," she told the Commission. "I could train other girls. The public likes my designs, so I know there is a good market. Then we could all get regular, good work."

"What is your priority?" one Commission member asked.

"A national award for me," she answered sheepishly.

The tie and dye workers in Jodhpur were suffering some of the most exploitative conditions the Commission saw. There is a mohalla of 400-500 home-based Muslim women doing this work in one part of the city. They told the Commission they were 2000 such workers in the city.

Usually all the family members work to produce one piece — a sari or dupatta. Men prepare the dyes. They do the work in three stages : they draw small squares into the desired pattern on the cloth and fill them in with various colours of dyes, wind threads tightly over these coloured spots, and then they dye the remainder of the cloth. The tying and dyeing can happen several times on the piece of cloth for different colours to be added to the pattern.

One group of women said they got paid for each operation e.g. 25 paise for filling colour. this way they earned Rs. 1-4/day. A trader gives them material for 100 saris. The rate is Re. 1/sari or Re. 1 for 3 dupattas. Out of 100, seven or eight are always rejected. Five women in one family worked on all the processes. It took them one month to finish 100 saris. Thus the monthly income of five women came to Rs. 94/or about Rs. 16 per woman. From this they have to buy the dyes and thread for the next job, as well as using their own vessels for dye.

These women had these priorities: better wages, working capital so they could buy their own cloth, space for working.

The Commission also met leather and clothing aritari workers in Jodhpur. In one house women were embroidering gold threads into skirts and 'odhnis' used for weddings — traditionally in Rajasthan, but now in other parts of the country as well. They pull the cloth tight over a cot and 6-8 were sitting around it doing the embroidery work. The lighting and ventilation were very poor. A woman named Pushpa gave the girls the work for Rs. 1.50/day. She lamented how little she made, but said "out of 'pity' for these poor girls I gave them work". She gets the material from a middleman and he sells them to shopkeepers or other traders.

Another group of 40 women doing this work on their own said

they can each earn Rs. 10/day if two girls help them. Their major problems were the harassment by middlemen and the irregularity of work. They all wanted loans.

In a meeting of 50 women doing aritari (brocade) work on footwear called mojri in the neighbourhood of Jodhpur, they said 1000 women do this work in Jodhpur. Twenty-six of them did the work for their own family business, 24 worked for others. The material is supplied by shoemakers, and they earn Rs. 3 for embroidering one pair, which takes one day. Most of them work from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. They said the regular mojri market has declined in recent years, but there is still a demand for higher quality ones.

This meeting was interrupted by some men who wanted commitments from the Commission for loans but things eventually settled down again.

In Surat city, the Commission met women doing golden (artificial) zari works on powerloom in a house where two family members and three relatives were employed. This is a gola community's traditional work. They work from 6 a.m. to 7 p.m. and earn about Rs. 300/- on a piece-rate basis. Their work is sent to Benaras. It is a thriving business of Surat, engaging not less than 5000 families.

More lace makers were met in Bihar. Rehana from Bhagalpur said five women work on one bedcover, which they finish in one day, paid Rs. 5/- for it. If any stain is found, Rs. 3/- deducted. They have never thought of buying the raw materials in bulk, and selling themselves. "We are not advanced as you think we are!" They told the Commission when asked about this idea. What they think they need is a clean work place so they will not lose their wages of stains. "But we cannot dream of any such space in our crowded mohallas! and we cannot go outside to work....."

In Srinagar, the Commission met a large number of girls doing the crafts of embroidery, carpet weaving, papermache, tailoring and weaving, connected to the Markaz-i-Behbooti Khwatees Miskee Bagh Centre. They give preference to orphans and destitute women. Training and employment programmes were linked with health and education programmes. There are hostel and training facilities for girls of Gujjar and Bakarwal communities (nomadic tribes). They try to give the girls confidence and skills to stand on their own feet.

The women who came to meet the Commission in Himachal Pradesh did not have such positive success stories with their crafts. Candle makers in Simla earned only Rs.2-3/day on good days, because their market was so limited. A Hosiery Cooperative was prac-

tically defunct because they had no work. Some women had taken a year long embroidery course and received machines, but had no order. Under TRYSEM, others got training and loans for knitting machines, but they are still waiting for a promised order from the police for their first job. Another woman got doll-making training, but has not market and no supply of raw materials. Many others had been trained in carpet weaving, sewing, and tailoring, but none had work. One official present at the meeting used all these examples to make her point, "Extension work is critical in these projects!" "They had tried to market the goods in village fairs, but with no success.

In Punjab, at the Tejpur meeting with Mahila Mandal the Commission visited their leather and tailoring centre. The President complained that raw materials were very expensive, and they did not have sufficient marketing links. The Commission members saw that the quality and designs of their products were high, and the prices very reasonable. The Secretary thought part of their problem was that they were on a kutchra road, so they did not get much traffic and it hampered their market. They wanted a building.

They talked about how much support and guidance they had received by the Research Organization of Delhi. They were a strong, well-motivated group who would fare well with a little marketing support.

The Bhileswar Mahila Samiti in Rajasthan is made up of sweepers and cleaners. They wanted to change their low status, so they took up a training programme and learned stitching and leather work. Then they began producing rexine bags, because leather was too expensive. They have not been able to sell any of their products. They have two years of production picked up. "We feel ridiculous!" they told the Commission. "Everyone laughs at us and says, see you were destined to be sweepers!"

Slum women in various parts of the country have been obliged by economic pressure to be very creative. In the Hyderabad slums, women were making plaster of paris statues with their children's help. Marketing is not a problem, but the demand is seasonal. Customers give orders at their name. They earn about Rs. 300/month during festival seasons. The downtown market was filled with numerous Ganesha statues made by them.

Jamuna, another woman from the slum in Bombay, makes surgical thread from goats' intestines, but she does not know about the rate for it because her husband sells it. Her neighbour, Nirmaladevi, who migrated from Alamgarh, six years ago was forced

to start cutting supari (betelnut) when her husband lost his work in the Bombay textile strike. She is supplied the suparis by a private trader. She cuts 6-7 kg. from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. every day for Rs. 5. She said it is dangerous because of her small children in the house running around the cutting block. She often has nightmares about what could happen.

In the Bangalore slums many women roll agarbatti. Mehbooba rolls 2000-3000 sticks a day. A woman from the factory delivers the power and sticks to her and collects the finished agarbattis. The factory is in the slum. She makes Rs. 1.25-1.50 per 1000. Every year they get a 10 paise raise in wages. As in bidi, 200-400 per 1000 are rejected which amounts to 25-30 paise. The legal minimum wage is Rs. 11/1000, but no one is aware of it. Sixty women in this slum do this work. Usually Mehbooba earns Rs. 12/week.

The woman said from the 'puli patti' is 'cold' so nothing happens, but the 'kali patti' is 'hot' so has a harmful effect on their skin.

Hasina, the mother of 13 children also does this work. She was one of many women who said they prefer to work at home, not outside.

Another woman in the Bangalore slum, Clara, was making toy sun glasses at home and selling them to a shopkeeper. She buys the raw materials local for Rs. 10. She makes a gross and sells them to the shopkeeper for Rs. 15. She says there is a good demand and the shopkeeper is willing to buy more, but for this she needs capital. "How much capital?" the Commission asked. "With Rs. 25-30, I could double my income," she replied. She supports one son and two daughters on this income, and though she never went to school, she can read and write. She never goes to a doctor. And while she goes to church, she expects nothing from them.

Another woman Kundamma canes chairs at her slum dwelling. Both she and her husband weave plastic cane into iron chairs. They earn Rs. 20-25/day, if they get work. Their house is in the middle of the slum, and "who walk all the way to this dirty place when they can get the same service on the main road? She learned this craft from her father, and taught her husband in turn.

Another woman, Ramanikamma, a slum dweller in Madras, does pottery in her tiny space. Her husband used to sit at the wheel, but since his illness, she had had to hire a boy to that job. She does all the other work—mixing and recycling, drying, and shopping the pots, fixing the kiln, purchasing raw materials of clay and wood. She earns about Rs. 300/month, but not during the monsoon. She is in constant fear of eviction. She wants a loan to build on the 10'x13'

land allotment that she received - she does not have sufficient space here.

In the Kolhapur slum in Maharashtra there are many chamar leather workers engaged in making chappals. Laxmi Gauri's husband cuts the soles and they both stitch them to the straps, by hand. She also puts gold thread on the straps in a decorative design. She earned Rs. 3/day, while he learned Rs. 20 for the same number of hours.

Another handicraft occupation the Commission met many women working in was coir. In Madras, Mangamma was making rope from coir. She borrows Rs. 50 to buy her raw materials, and pays 6% interest per day on it. Besides credit, her problem is workplace. She would like to work in a community workshed if it is not too distant. She is in constant fear of eviction after being evicted from five places in her life.

In Kerala, women who are members of the coir co-op get higher rates than non-organized women, but the work is not regular. They face stiff competition from plastics, and with mechanization. Seventy-five per cent of the four lakh coir workers in Kerala are women. There is a threat from the neighbouring state of Tamilnadu where new husking machines are being adopted, and only men are being employed on those machines. The minimum wage is officially 11.80 for this work, but they cut it down to piece work and women earn only Rs. 6-8.

Their work involves soaking the coconut shell and rotting the green husk, so they can extract the fibers inside. They beat these to prepare the fibers for spinning, which they do both by machine and by hand. Gomti has done this work since she was 12. Now she is 46. She studied upto the 4th Standard. Her father is a landless mason. She had been deserted by her husband eight years before. Her married son lives separately from her. Her daughter, who was also deserted by her husband, lives and works with Gomti.

She earns Rs. 10-15/day for husking and spinning 100 coconuts. She works 7 a.m.-6 p.m. The owner of the land hires her directly. He gives her advances when she needs them with no interest. She attends her union's meeting once a year and gets a bonus through them. Due to their hands being perpetually submerged in water, her palms had deep cracks. Her priority was an old age pension equivalent to her present income.

The only kite maker the Commission met was in Ahmedabad. Rasulanbanu makes a kind of kite called 'ghesia' for a factory, eight months a year. She gets Rs. 30 for 500 kites. It takes her two days

to make this many, with the help of her neighbour (whom she pays Rs. 2) and her two daughters:

She also produces kites on her own. She buys the paper from the local merchant, and some from Calcutta. She knows the entire process for producing kites. She said she needs working capital and a bigger workspace without so many children running around.

The most beautiful setting in which the Commission encountered artisans was in rural Orissa - the state with the most traditional crafts. Their silk and cotton ikat weaving, silver filigree stone and wood carving, toy making, applique work and painting are famous.

The Commission members travelled to the village of Raghurajpur, Puri District by road. They passed a stone carving of a gotapuri dancer representing the famous Orissi dance which originated here. In the centre of the village it was busy but quiet. The houses all had high raised platform on their front sides, roofed by the first floor, so the crafts people had shaded, open air porches where they sat to work. The men and women were traditionally dressed in handloom ikat dhotis or their simply wrapped saris which need no blouse. There were 46 households in this village. The households towards the back were where the broom and basket makers lived and worked. Beyond them stretched lush green paddy fields. In the centre, most people were engaged in this village's craft specialty-images of Lord Jagannath. Some worked on 'pattachitra', hand-made paper on which they paint the trio of gods. Others make papermache masks and carved wooden images of these same three. They use bright orange, red, yellow, white, and black colours. One woman making the small wooden trio of gods said she would earn Rs. 4 on the entire set. Another was working on a set of masks. They take one day to complete, and she makes a profit of Rs. 5 when she sells them for Rs. 14.

They sell their things to the Handicrafts Board through the cooperative but only 10 of the women were members, so mostly their husbands sold their products. Most women said they cannot afford to buy the raw materials and that the cooperative offered no help with this.

Other women were making the brightly painted wooden toy animals that Orissa is famous for. The week previous to the Commission's visit Sunamani sold a large Jagannath trio set for Rs. 200.

However, this kind of sales are rare. Most families said "Our entire family works at this, and still the income is insufficient for

necessities."

Leena was sitting on her porch painting Lord Jagannath in many sizes. She and her three sisters learned to do this from their father. Her husband was a famous artist who deserted her. Now she lives in her daughter's house. She works at painting from 9.30 a.m. to 4 p.m. She does all the housework as well. She purchases the raw materials, makes the paper herself, and the colours. She said she needs a soft loan. And she said that her biggest problem was "too much work". Her monthly income is Rs. 100-120. Her sales are good during festivals, and she was a good artist. One Commission member requested her, "What are your difficulties, tell us?" She started to speak, but her lips quivered. Someone else said "She has no sons, so at this age she has to live alone and do all this work."

No one mentioned the husband and his act of desertion.

Garments

In West Bengal, at Midnapur and Howra Haat, traders give material to women for stitching on piece rate. They distribute this kind of work to villages all around Calcutta. For stitching 12 petticoats, they pay Rs. 8. Gitacan sew 20 a day in 11 hours if her two daughters help her. Thus she earns Rs. 300 a month—before she deducts her costs for thread, lace, and maintenance of her sewing machine.

Shantila does the same work in a factory. Ten women are employed for stitching, and one man for cutting. She makes Rs. 300-350 per month. She prefers to work in the factory, where she can use their equipment; they also supply all the raw materials.

In Bangalore, Gulabjan's trader pays her only Rs. 1.25 per petticoat. She stitches them on a second-hand sewing machine which she brought for Rs. 500. She earns between 7-15/day, depending on how many interruptions she encounters from her four young children. The contractor pays her son. Her husband is an unemployed poster painter. She also has to pay for her thread, needles and lace.

Champaben from Rajkot is a little better off than she might be because she knows how to do the cutting work itself; otherwise she would be completely at the mercy of the contractor. She can do this work independently as well as for a contractor who give her regular low paid work. She stitches petticoats and children's garments for a shopkeeper. Due to the drought, she is not getting much work on her own. She is more dependent now on the low rate of the contractor. He pays Rs. 5 for a dozen petticoats (41 paise each)! She

told the Commission that blouses bring her the best income. "If I stitch it on my own, I earn Rs. 7. For a trader I earn Rs. 3. For a contractor, Rs. 1.50."

During the marriage, Holi and Diwali seasons, she can earn Rs. 250/month. Otherwise she earns only 200/month. "Our competitors are the men tailors. They have a better reputation of work and their own shops." She liked the idea of having her own shop. "It should be in the market place. Then I could make a good living."

In Ahmedabad the rates are a little better than Rajkot because the women had formed a union and demanded higher payment. Mushtakinbibi and her three daughters stitch six dozen petticoats a day. They get Rs. 8 per dozen, so they usually earn Rs. 48/day. "When we got unionized, the contractors stopped our work and brought new women. Then we staged a morcha. Now we have gone so far as to demand that tailoring be included in the state schedule of minimum wages. Let us see what happens....." She is on the Executive Committee of her union.

Another kind of stitching activity that many women are involved in is quilt making. In Ahmedabad, Karimaben makes quilt covers from 'chindi'—rags from textile mills. Unemployment looms high in her area of Dariapur, which is quite riot-prone. Thus even men have taken up this work, and the women are afraid it will bring their stitching rates down, "which we have raised only with difficulty through our union". There are 400 women like Karimaben, working for traders, getting Rs.2 for one quilt cover. About 200 women have formed a cooperative, and have a shop in the market. There is a good demand for their chindi quilts from both rural and urban poor. They have only one problem: non-availability of rags. They demand that "All the mill waste should be directly given to us (producers)."

Because of Gujarat's large textile mills, Rajkot also has its chindi workers. Prabhaben stitches these quilts from rags she buys in bulk. Formerly she was paid 40 paise per quilt cover. Then she took a loan from the Women's Bank so she could buy the materials herself. She produces her own quilt covers and sells each for six rupees. Her income has risen from Rs. 100 to Rs. 500 per month. Now she helps other women get loans to do the same. But she is frustrated by the closure of mills in Gujarat. Chindi is less easily available and costlier than before. Her husband is a retired bank peon with no pension, and her daughter-in-law "is useless"; she earns the Rs. 500 through her own labour.

Other women in Ahmedabad recycle gunny sacks instead of textile rags. They make new bags by stitching two old bags together.

They are paid Rs. 8/day for stitching 25 bags. Though the trader does give them thread, he does not give regular work. And they constantly breathe in the fine cement dust which also gets into their eyes and causes sores.

In Punjab, there is a garment centre run by PUNWAC in Jullunder City. They teach tailoring, knitting, and embroidery. They stitch uniforms for the police, and canvas bags for the army. They also knit police socks, Jaspal, a woman from Patiala whose husband deserted her, earns Rs. 150/month there stitching canvas bags.

At a similar establishment in Ludhiana, women are making woollen cloths, police uniforms, fancy cardigans, children's clothing and undergarments, on modern machinery. Last year this centre supplied 5000 uniforms to the police. Saranjeet told the Commission she was illiterate and without work. She took training here for 15 days and started working. She makes 6-7 cardigans a week at Rs. 7/cardigan. She earns about Rs. 150/month, the only income for their family. She said she would prefer to work at home if she could get a knitting machine and some working capital.

The Commission visited one other such tailoring and knitting training centre in Jammu at Budayal, Quizan, Poonch district. The Central Social Welfare Board runs it to train scheduled caste girls. They got their sewing machines through an interest free loan at the end of their training.

Throughout the tour the Commission observed what great scope there is for women during stitching work in these small centres or at home. There is an ever-increasing market for ready-made goods, but the existing disadvantages are : In private centres, women get good training and a subsequent job for their new skills, but their wages are extremely low. In training programmes, women acquire skills and equipment, but rarely practical tie-ups with markets or working capital. Without these, women often end up in the long run, deeper in debt than they started due to having to buy equipment loans and no work.

These training programmes do not adequately teach women cutting, which binds them to piece work for someone who has cutting done for them. As long as women are doing unorganised stitching for contractors, their wages will remain at their present low level.

In the Ahmedabad meeting with voluntary agencies, someone mentioned that the Khadi Board had made a resolution to give all tailoring work to women's organizations, but that it is not being

implemented. She said, "The system of middlemen seems inevitable-why?"

Instead of answering why, the government official said, "Now there are so many women's organizations that each one gets little work— less than earlier."

Each stitcher mentioned that she works till almost the last day of the pregnancy.

The money we earn from our blood

Food Processing

Jhanjuban is a 60 years old masala grinder in Bhavnagar. In the masala season she spends her days walking the streets of middle class neighbourhood, calling out for work. When someone requests her services, she stops to sit in their courtyard, or even on the street, and pounds spices in her iron vessel. Her customers pay her by the kilo, and some are more fair than others. Some want fine masala, and give her a small sieve for sifting it. Some weigh her work after she has finished, so the loss for seeds and stems and sifting falls on her head. Others weigh before, and thus she makes a slightly better income. She gets between Rs. 1-2 per kilo.

Her three sons are all construction workers who live apart from her. If she cannot find work, she borrows money from a neighbour until she earns something, or until her sons can help her pay debt. She has done this work since she was six years old. She learned it from her neighbours.

When she cannot get work in houses, she works in masala shops. She prefers this because she does not have to walk so much on her aching feet. Some shopkeepers are kind and weigh her work after it is finished, so added salt and oil work to her advantage. Some let her take the chilli seeds home. Others instruct her to grind them with chilli. Some shopkeepers usually have two or three other people sitting and watching her, to make sure she does not steal anything.

Masala machines are the greatest threat to her work. More and more shopkeepers are buying them, because they say it is cheaper. And they do not have to have people watching the machine to prevent theft.

She coughs and sneezes a lot from this work. And by constant pounding for 54 years, her whole body has been stiff. She wants a loan to help her family get a proper house, and education for her children and grandchildren, "so that their lives will not end up like

ours". She added, " this money we earn from our own blood."

While Jhanjuban prefers shop work, Harkhiben prefers working at houses, because then she can bring the youngest of her seven children along, and tie her in a hammock while she grinds. Some problems with this are that chillies sometimes blow in the child's eyes, and it is difficult to get it over and quite her again. Also, in the shops there is no guarantee when she will get home. She has to stay till the shopkeeper is satisfied with her supply. It is too difficult for her young children if she does not arrive home till 8 or 9 p.m.

These women's stories are typical of women involved in food processing work of many kinds. Their hours are long and physically strenuous. They do not get much remuneration for extremely monotonous work. The worst aspect though, usually, is that they have no guarantee of finding work on any given day. Some days they find no work. Other days they grind chillies for days on end. The Commission did not meet or find any report of men doing work with chilli anywhere in India. Women harvest, women dry, women clean the seeds, women grind. Women take the burn of chilli for whatever small sum they can garner.

The Commission met a group of 15 women in Jabalpur, M.P., who had organized themselves into a spice pounders cooperative. Only six of them at a time can get work, and they have difficulty marketing their products. They are not traditional spice grinders. This was a schemes they created to help them to earn some money. The project officer of Women and Child Development commented that they tried to make recommendations and buy their products, but they were generally not upto good quality standards. They need proper training by skilled trainers.

Women in Almora, U.P., were doing a little better with their chilli processing. They were making powder and pickles which they bartered for grains and pulses at the weekly haat. They were getting market value for the products, even if no cash.

One advantage to many kinds of food processing jobs is that they can be done during the off-seasons of agriculture. Chillies can be ground the year round. Potatoes can be stored for long periods of time to be later made into chips or other salted snacks, offering alternative employment to agricultural labourers.

In Ahmedabad the Commission met Chanduben, a representative of women who do groundnut shelling in winter. She said 10-15 women from each village go to Jamnagar district for shelling. Men and women get the same wage, Rs. 10/day, but men rarely accept this work. These are hand picked seeds for exports, and the

women get sore, cracked, swollen lips from the weeks of endless shelling.

Almora women have figured out a scheme to salvage their unsold milk. They make 'khoya' out of their surplus and sell it in the next day's market. It does not spoil because of their cool weather, and they earn Rs. 1.50 for each kilo they sell.

In the Rajkot meeting, one woman told about the samosa business she began after getting a Rs. 1100 loan from the Women's Bank. She and her daughter-in-law make samosa, and her two sons go to sell them at two cinemas. They earn Rs.100/day with all four of them working. She has seen a big increase in income since taking the loan.

The President of the Women's Bank in Rajkot suggested to the Commission that the provision of subsidy should be extended to voluntary agencies who give loans to poor women for productive purposes. Then another voluntary agency workers said that because poor women are so used to being wage labourers, they need special extensive training to bring them into self-employment. At this point a third worker complained them that Women's Economic Development Corporation has not been helpful at all.

In Udaipur the Commission met papad rollers at Hathi Pole who were self-employed. They buy the ingredients and produce the papad which they sell to traders who either export them or sell on the open market. They can sell as many as they make. Their only demand was working capital. Their economics work like this: From two kg of flour they can earn Rs. 8-10 in four hours. If they had capital, they could double their daily purchases and sales. They did not like the idea of buying and selling collectively because, as they said, though they are of one caste, there is no unity amongst them. They belong to a community called Purabia. The traditional occupation of their men was liquor distilling which has been stopped by the government. Now they do casual labour at jobs like truck driving or cleaning.

Papad rolling employs the largest number of women involved in food processing. This, like bidi rolling, has some minimum wage and other protective legislation. But also like bidi, it is almost always given out of piece rate, thus evading any legal responsibilities towards workers.

In Rajkot, papad rollers told the Commission that they earned Rs. 2.50/Kg. of papad. but that 80 gms. is routinely rejected, regardless of quality. Most rollers were earning a little less than Rs. 5/-day.

Then the Commission visited the Lijjat Papad sub-centre in Valod village, district Surat. They met the core workers of the groups and the manager. There are 476 women in Lijjat's main centre in town and 250 women working in villages. They all take the dough from the centre and roll at home. Lijjat started its operations 17 years ago, and they are registered under the Public Trust Act.

Chandraben was the oldest worker there. She said they started with only 15 women who went to Bombay and took training at the main centre. The second year they had 45 women, by the 4th year, 300. Training is in learning the standardized proportions of spices, size, weight, etc.

She said it was initially difficult to involve women of all castes and communities. They had to do a lot of extension work. Now they are one-third Muslims, one-third tribals, and one-third others. Because tribals never had such traditional skills, they required extensive training.

Anyone can become a member by rolling 3Kgs. of papad. Most women are attracted to this work because they can do it at home. They take prepared dough from the centre by weight, and return the finished papad. Their accounts are very simple, specific tables which are easy to understand. Last year they all got a Rs. 700 Diwali bonus.

During the meeting, a tribal woman said, "Before, we used to go for agricultural work in the fields for Rs.3/day. Now we remain home and earn Rs. 6." When asked the secret of her success, she replied. "Kaam-ma Lagan' (dedication to work) and cleanliness."

At this point the manager stepped into the conversation. He appeared with all his benevolence, most powerful. He spoke for Lijjat saying, "Production units like this should *not* be treated as commercial units. It is not possible to follow the Minimum Wages Act and Provident Fund Act. There should be an alternative set of rules for women's organizations like this." Then he went on to complain of "certain forces" that encourage strikes, unrest, unfair employment practices—with the support of some journalists.

When these forces began to be felt, Lijjat extracted a pledge from each member to promise to be loyal to the Centre.

The Commission left the Centre and went to visit some of the tribals' houses. First they met Mangi, a landless woman who has been rolling papad for six years. She said the Centre is strict on women producing 35 papad from 400 gm. of dough. "So now I have learned how to count to 35. My husband still cannot," she said

giggling. She had never even rolled a roti before taking up this work. They make thick big 'rotlas' with their two hands. She earns about Rs. 16/day.

Dhapu earns Rs. 19.50/day. The Commission saw her name and payment listed in the register.

A young tribal girl named Dhani said that her mother was a domestic worker in a landlord's house (for Rs. 20/month) and also worked in the fields for Rs. 10/day, during the season. Now she has learned papad rolling and brings an additional Rs.50/month home from this.

Bhani, like many women in the area, prefers papad rolling to agricultural work because it is in the home, where it is easier to care for the children. It is quite evident in this area that agricultural wages have gone up because of women's preference for papad work.

Pushpa, a middle class member of the Managing Committee, also rolls papad for some independent income of her own. According to her eight hours of work would come to Rs. 550/month. She said one advantage of the Lijjat unit in the village is that it brings three different communities together to work. This causes certain differences to vanish.

The Commission got interested in this idea, and one member asked her, "Do you take up other social issues as a group then?"

Her face drew closed as she said, "No. We do not want to lose our income. We do not take up other issues."

Another Managing Committee member, Nasim Banu, spoke up quickly to say, "Women gain a lot of confidence through this work. Women give strength to other women, even unconsciously."

Chandraben added that the additional income has definitely helped in getting the children educated, and that their new Savings and Loan Society has 450 members.

The Commission left the papad town Valod with a memorandum from the management pleading to be exempted from labour laws. The memorandum stole the spirit of the success story of Lijjat papad.

VENDORS AND HAWKERS

"Do Tokri Ki Jagaah....."

Although Nagmani has been selling vegetables and seasonal fruits in Hyderabad for the past 35 years, she still does not have a

secure place to sit and vend. She is not allowed to sit on the road where all her potential customers are passing, unless, of course, she pays the police with fruits and vegetables and a bribe of Rs. Rs. 35-100, depending on their mood. If she fails to meet their demands, she gets thrown into jail, her baskets and goods are confiscated. Once during a hot summer day, they beat her up badly. Ever since then she has been changing from place to place, market to market, always on the lookout. "Hence my business never settles down", she lamented. In this state of fear of harassment, she earns about Rs. 20-25/day. Her priorities are a legitimate place in the market, and a licence fee and/or rent of a space in the market if it is legally given.

Vegetable vendors in Ahmedabad face these difficulties even more. They are not allowed to travel by city transport bus with their produce. Therefore they have to walk the long distance from the wholesale market to the city market with heavy loads, or pay Rs. 10 by scooter — half of their day's earnings. Surajben said, "To pay that scooter fare, I have to borrow money so that I can bring more produce to off-set the loss. Then I reach the market and the police begin to harass me for bribes. They are never satisfied. Then my baskets might be confiscated. If this happens, how do I manage to even pay the 10% daily interest, much less the loan itself? We are 'vepari' (business people). Why are we treated like criminals?"

When the Commission asked the group of vendors what their priority was, they unanimously said, "Do tokri ki jagaah" (Space for two basket). They they took up the story of how in recent years the police and municipal authorities do not let them sit on the road in front of the market, so that cars can park there. Once, when the authorities tried to grant them a market outside the city where they could have space, they said, "Why do you not ask the cars to be parked over there instead?"

In the Madras market, Chintamani sells fruits. She buys them for Rs. 80 daily, and earns about Rs. 25/day — before expenses. She has to daily give Rs. 1-2 to the police. Then she has to pay the shopkeeper the instalment on the Rs. 300 loans she took from him. The interest alone is Rs. 15/day. After she gives him the interest and Rs. 3 and Rs. 4 on the capital, she is left with Rs. 3-5 for her living expenses.

Kandamanal sells vegetables near Chintamani. She took a loan of Rs. 500 and pays back Rs. 3/day.

Selvi, a flower seller, borrows Rs. 50 every day. The interest is Rs. 1/day. She says her business is not doing well. The flowers perish

too quickly. From Rs. 50 purchase, she makes Rs. 10/day. One rupee goes to the moneylender. The remaining nine supports her and her children. They lived on the pavement, which sometimes gets flooded with water.

Another woman sells tamarind. She buys 50 kg. and sells 12-15 kg. daily. She earns Rs. 12/day. From this she repays some of her Rs. 150 loans, on which she pays 10% interest per day.

In the Bombay slums, vendors complained about not being able to sell their vegetables at the regular place. The police harass them constantly, between arrivals of the Municipal van which lifts all their baskets once a week. They have to pay a regular bribe of Rs. 10. "We have to tolerate this because we have no licence. And no one will give us a licence!" One woman present complained. "If I were allowed to sell without harassment, without bribes, without constant fear — I would be able to earn Rs. 40/day, instead of Rs. 10 or 15, like now." All the women agreed that their priorities were a place in the market, working capital, and a licence.

Another such vendor in Pune said that despite having a Railway Vendor's Pass, she is being harassed while moving her goods from the farmers market in the railway market. "It is just because I am a 'jawan aurat' (youthful woman)!"

The vendors at Ukhrul, Manipur, said their problems were transportation. They now have to buy their vegetables from middlemen who bring them from Imphal, and it is too expensive. They want cheap, regular transportation service, so that they can buy goods at wholesale rates themselves. They cannot get loans for their business, because: the bank want to see assets, and (as they told the Commission) their village was too far outside the bank's 16 km. radius policy.

In Singbhoon, a village in Bihar, a tribal named Serfa sells chicken at the weekly haat. Her problem is that big customers often snatch away her basket of chicken, throwing only a small amount of money at her face. They are on bicycles, so she cannot catch them. "Once I was walking to the haat holding two chicken in my hand, he snatched them from my hand, without giving a paise! I take care to raise these birds during the whole week, and then I am robbed of everything. I thought of hiring a cycle-rickshaw to take me there, but I do not raise enough chicken to be able to afford to pay for the rickshaw.

In the Bangalore slum, Pungawaran sells her famous idlis which she had been vending for 50 years. She took up this occupation at the age of 12 when their mother deserted them. She was the

oldest of seven children, and her father was a landless agricultural labourer. She makes 50-60 idlis a day. She sells them from 8-10 a.m. Her problem is that clients eat idlis on credit and often do not get around to paying. She charges 10 paise per idli. She said she cannot make more because she lacks capital. If she had Rs. 100, she could earn more. She could buy more supplies, and hire a child to help her. She had no complaint about the police.

Another woman in Madras is also selling idlis, but her profit margin is larger because she sells tea with hers. Govindamma was widowed 30 years back. Her husband's small tea shop was demolished after that, so she took to serving from her small house. She is also faced with the problem that customers eat on credit and do not pay. She earns Rs. 15/daily. Her priority is widowhood pension.

A channa (chickpea) vendor in the Bombay slum buys her chickpeas in the wholesale market and roasts, salts, and packages them at home. For 33-1/2 kg channa, she earns about Rs. 10/day. But the police and municipal harassment is tolerable. She wants a licence desperately. "If you cannot give me a licence," she said to the Commission, "at least give me a card of some sort, or some paper."

However, not all women vendors are in such dire circumstances. The Commission met a very innovative vendor in the Kulu market who had opened a small chemist's booth. She is a B.Sc. pass in Chemistry. Her father is a poor farmer. She used to sell drugs from their home, but now she rents this place for Rs. 10/month. Her little brother helps her there. She sells herbal medicines, ayurvedic drugs, and herbs. She often buys from women bringing these plants from the mountains. She knows about these things because her grandfather was a Ayurvedic 'Vaid'. There is a good local market for her products. She was very enthusiastic about her business and told the Commission that next she wanted a bigger place, and more working capital.

Another woman in the Kulu Market sells readymade garments her husband brings from Ludhiana and Delhi. Her daily turnover is Rs. 100-250. The net profit ranges from Rs. 50-80. Her main problem is space in the market. The police do not harass her, but other officials do. If she give them a bribe, they do not bother her for the next two months.

A Kulu vendor who sells in the town's largest market felt more harassed than these women. she said there are more women vendors than men, but men sell industrial goods and consume most of

the space, while women sell vegetables, fruits, eggs and fish from small baskets.

A shoe vendor who sells in the market rents a space at Rs. 400/month. She walks to the town eight miles away where she buys the shoes. Then she returns in a bus with the goods. Her present stock was worth Rs. 2000-2500. She earns Rs. 600-700 per month, and does better during melas. But the shop rent was hurting. She uses her money to support her ill husband and two daughters.

The Commission also visited a H.P. haat in Kafota, where they saw women selling vegetables, handlooms, handknits, posts, roots, and herbs. They were bright and talkative and open. They come here twice a week to this market near the temple.

At another haat in Kausani, U.P., the Commission was impressed by the woollen handknitted garments the women of the Bhootia tribe produce and sell. Other tribal women there were selling herbs, roots, and vegetables.

Another innovative vendor the Commission met was a woman in Hyderabad who exchanges vessels for used garments. She gets the clothes more cheaply by exchanging vessels than if she paid cash for them, because people are happy to take something new and useful for their old clothes. She buys the vessels in wholesale for Rs. 500. She goes street to street trading. She has to take her children with her, as there is no one at home to watch them. She repairs, cleans and presses the clothes at night. The police do not harass her, but the traders always find fault with the clothes and pay her low prices. Thus she prefers to sell at the market. She gets from Rs. 2-20 per article. She earns about Rs. 500/month this way. She wants a loan of Rs. 1000, and a licence or I.D. card for safety.

In Bombay, used garment dealers are harassed more than the other vendors, because they have to enter housing colonies and multi-storeyed residential complexes. Anytime someone reports a garment is lost or stolen, they are first to be suspected as culprits. They want licences, and proper storage facilities, as they cannot store the clothes in their own tiny, crowded, vulnerable slum rooms. They are ready to pay rent for a storage place, as long as it is less than the high charge the traders near the market exact from them now.

A Bombay vendor organizer told the Commission that the problem of hawkers needed to be taken up by the government and thoroughly discussed. They have been talking of having hawking zones for 22 years, but still nothing has happened. "In 22 years, their pockets have been filling from what they pull out of ours".

The most impressive market the Commission visited was the women's market in Imphal, Manipur. It has been in existence since 1891, and till today it is completely a women's market. On one side they sell all their food products, from spices to fruits and vegetables to grains to meats. On the other side are all their beautiful hand-looms and handknitted and readymade garments. Women sit with their sewing machines, or vend tea, or barter their medical herbs. Across the length of the market stretch 590 parallel raised platforms, upon which the women sit, facing the alleys which run between them. Under their platforms are strong boxes where they can store their goods at night. Each woman has a small kerosene lamp which she lights in front of her produce after dark. The customers walk between two rows of women vending their things. Everyone is covered by a shed roof, which gives them shade in the hot season, and a dry place to work in the rains. It is a throbbing, vibrant market where lakhs of rupees change hands each day.

The Commission learned about the women's recent sleep-in-night-vigil strike that took place in this market while they were visiting Manipur, and they went to investigate. They arrived at the market at 10 p.m. No men are allowed inside at night. On their raised platforms, the Commission saw that women had strung up their mosquito nets. This was their sleeping place at night. Each woman had a small light marking the place of her vigil. They were undressed, retired, some cooking or eating supper, others were singing bhajans or mala. The Commission members asked for their leader, and in no time they were led to Sakhi, a strong middle-aged woman. Then the word spread, and all the women assembled and freely discussed their problems with the Commission.

Sakhi told them that this protest vigil was on, because the government had plans to vacate this market and rebuild it — without the women's consent. The first plan was to move the market outside the town, because this is now valuable urban space. The officials showed them the place, and the women refused to move. Who would go way out to that place to buy?

Then they came up with their second plan. They would rebuild the market into a modern multi-storeyed super market and shopping complex, where the vendors would also be accommodated. Sakhi said, "We know what will happen then. They will keep Rs. 10,000 as the rental charges of the shops. Which of my women could afford that? It means the big traders will then move, and usurp our market. They plan all sorts of shops for electrical goods, radios, fancy clothing and beauty saloon. That means it will no longer be a

vegetable market. Nor a women's market. We simply refuse to allow it." Sakhi was very strong.

The blueprint has been modified twice by HUDCO and shown to these women for approval. Delegations have come to Delhi to meet the State Ministers and plead their case. The disputes is still not settled. And still the women have not agreed to any of the government schemes.

The Commission left the Women's Market that night, sensing the essence of the vendors' protest: the market is a matter of life and death for them, as land is for the farmer.

The Commission met the Acting Chief Minister next day, who said sympathetic words about 'my vending mothers'.

CONSTRUCTION WORKERS

" We Only See These Stones...."

Thirteen women were sitting on an open slope in Shiulaha village, Banda District, U.P., when the Commission passed in their jeep. It was 12.30 p.m. The sun was at its peak, scorching hot. There was no tree in sight. The women continued on through, at their work, pounding and pounding to crush stones. The 13 of them earn Rs. 34 for filling two trolleys with their crushed stone. This comes to less than Rs. 3 per woman for an entire day's work. But they do not get this work everyday—the trolleys come irregularly.

Once someone came from the village, promising to give charkhas to the women. He collected Rs. 10 from each of them, and never returned.

When asked about their contractor's name, their supervisor, the government officials, and Department details, they had no idea about any of them. One woman said, " We do not know whose stones we are crushing, we do not see who pays our wages, nor do we see how much is actually paid to our Supervisor. We only know these stones— nothing else."

One day from Allahabad to Banda district, the Commission stopped on the roadside where Kol women were involved in construction work. Some were digging stones out from the earth; others were crushing them. Forty-six families involved in this work had been camping there for many years. The women gathered and hesitantly talked about their work. They work 15-20 days a month. Wages are paid to the group. They get Rs. 200 for loading one truck. Although there is a fixed size truck for this rate, the contractor al-

ways sends a larger one, with no increase in payment. Each truck is loaded by five workers, usually three men and two women. The truck comes once in 10-15 days.

There is no difference in the work of men and women. Both break stones, and do loading. This is government work, given out on contract to the thekedar. He takes no signature upon receiving payment. They take advances from him when needed— which is most of the time. He deducts the advance from their wages, plus an extra Rs. 10 for Rs. 150 they borrow. The payment of wages is done to their men, because “ they are our maliks”.

Originally these workers came from Rewa district in M.P. but that was 20-30 years ago. Many have no belonging in their native place, no land, no houses. They all leave at Holi and return in the monsoon. They also go back for marriages.

In the nine working months they go to work early, without food. In the afternoon they return home, and cook food. Once in seven days, they go to collect firewood. Though the forests seem close, they have to walk very far. They give Rs.3 to the forest guard who allows them to collect wood.

They want regular work throughout the year. Their earnings are not sufficient to even fill their bellies. Their camp was on the roadside, on government land. Hence, the authorities often evict them. They retreat to the forest for a while, then come back.

People working at the work site breaking stones receive payment every 15 days. Women get Rs. 9, girls Rs. 5, men get Rs. 11, boys Rs. 7. The little girl labourers were miniature copies of their mother— already married, heads covered, breaking stones, head-loading. The muster stated that 32 workers were on duty for the day. All 32 names were men's. We counted a total of 43 workers: 3 men, 14 children, and 26 women, on-the-spot, there and then. The supervisor could only answer “that's the way it goes here”.

None of the workers vote, and none of the women know anything about payment because it all passes through their men's hands.

In the Simla, H.P., meeting, other road construction women came to meet the Commission. Pansara, a young woman of 16 to 17 years, said that she did not know which was her native place, she has been here so long. She began working at stone breaking in Nahar when she was 10. She earns Rs. 12/day— the same as men on the work site. They get no maternity benefits, so they work till the last, and resume work 4 to 5 days after delivery. They all live

right on the construction site. She did not know how migrant workers arrived there for work. She thought the contractor brought them.

Her eight-year-old sister was injured while working with her mother. She was taken to the hospital in Chandigarh and given treatment worth Rs. 500— in her mother's name, who was eligible for treatment. Pansara got married five years back to a man who also works there. When the Commission probed her about her roots, she struggled and said, "Why does it matter? We were born here, and we will die here breaking these stones."

Another woman working with Pansara said she came from Chamba with 30 others from her village because they had no water for irrigation. The contractor paid their bus fare and deducted it from their wages. She said their daily diet consisted of rice and salt. Sometimes they had tea at the site, but never in their homes. Not even men — "We cannot afford tea." She said firewood was scarce and expensive.

In Jammu the Commission met other women road constructors on the highway to Delhi. They were working on the highroad while their huts and colourful saris were spread in the low areas. Thirty-five of them gathered and huddled against each other to sit and talk with the Commission. Their deep green and deep blue saris revealed their Bilaspur, M.P. origin. "These women will wear those blue cheap, short saris even if they go to the end of the world."

Entire families worked here. The oldest people tended the homes and small children. All the older children and other adults worked. They have land at home, but no irrigation facilities, so have suffered famine for the last 10 years. Their only alternative is Famine Relief Work in their state where workers earn only Rs. 5 (women) or Rs. 9 (men) — all given in grains.

So they migrate here to earn Rs. 12.50/day. If they miss a day, however, Rs. 27 is deducted. The women's names are included on the muster roll, and their signatures taken. No maternity leave or creche is available. They pay their own medical expenses. They often get burned from tarring work. Women resume work one month after childbirth. Their houses are kachcha and they often have to spend Rs. 200-250 for repairs. "We have to spend for everything except water!" one woman complained.

Their priorities were Rs. 18/day - Rs. 540/month and that this kind of work should be available at their native place.

In Bangalore the Commission met women involved in building

construction work. At many of the worksites the Commission found creches being run by a voluntary agency. They care for children aged 3-13 years. The contractor has given the place on the site. They are provided with milk, vegetable curry, and rice for lunch. A doctor visits them regularly. Parents do not have to pay for these services — the voluntary agencies and some contractors contribute funds.

These workers have migrated from Gulbarga and Kajhori districts because of severe drought and lack of work. The women work till the 9th month of pregnancy and resume after 15-30 days. They earn Rs. 9/day.

Even PWD construction workers in Kulu, H.P., hired directly by the department, are not receiving equal wages. Women got Rs. 12/day while men got Rs. 15/. And there was no childcare service provided.

One voluntary agency in Bhopal said that almost nowhere were equal wages paid. They felt that the principal employers should be held responsible and fined. They claimed even contractors for government buildings did not comply with fair wages practices.

In Madras, representatives of construction workers unions presented the Commission a memorandum stating that these workers number 5 lakhs in Tamilnadu. Contracting and sub-contracting reduces workers to a very low status. Women occupy the lowest rung. They do masonry labour, earth work, mosaic work, roofing, and concrete work. Although these are all skilled jobs, and back breaking tasks, they are labelled 'unskilled' and therefore paid the lowest rates. They are denied training and access to improving their skills.

Usually the workers on big construction projects are recruited by sub-contractors, housed on the site, and paid very low wages by the big contractor — R. 7-13/day. They are usually assured employment as long as the project lasts. Other methods of finding jobs are: being part of a labour team whose 'Mistri' (gangman) secures work for his gang. He is usually the 'mason', and all the others are considered his helper; waiting in the market at a known places where contractors do recruiting on a daily, weekly and monthly basis.

Because of the "bonded" quality of the labour, such insecurity as employment, the changing contractors and work places, it is very difficult to demand minimum wages or social security. The employer will simply hire a different gang. The union asked for a Central legis-

lation to regulate employment through a Labour Board, which should have a fair representation of women, and be able to levy a tax on the industry for social security use.

Many women complained that laws like Maternity Benefits Act, and E.S.I. Act do not apply because of the absence of a permanent employer-employee relationship. This Board could be responsible for disbursing these benefits from the cess levy fund.

Another complaint women gave about legislation regarding their employment, was this curfew law. "We are not allowed to do contracting and terracing work which pay higher because we cannot work after 7 p.m., as per law! Why are only the laws which hurt implemented? What about laws like Minimum Wages or Contract Labour? We should be able to work overtime and be paid for it just like men are!"

Laxmi then spoke up to add, "We are not even paid half of Rs. 17/day minimum wage. And then I broke my leg and was bedridden for three months, no one gave medical assistance. And still there is some defect with my leg."

Govindamma, though she has been a construction worker for 27 years, still earns Rs. 12/day while even inexperienced men get Rs. 20. Masons get Rs. 35/day, there are no women masons — "Even after 27 years of practice," she said, "they do not consider us suitable for 'skilled' jobs." Five years back, she earned Rs. 11/day. "Prices have risen by leaps and bound in the last five years, but my wage has only risen by Re. 1/."

Rajasthani tribals in Udaipur district also have complaints about their wages. They are doing famine relief construction work due to the draught, but are not receiving wages. The daily labour rate is officially 7 kg grain/day, but they are only getting five kg. They requested for purchasing kerosene, tea and sugar, but so far their request is "pending".

In Pai village women face the same problems, except that they only receive their meager foodgrain payment once in a fortnight.

Assamese women at Holewar Barpukhuri are migrant construction workers involved in pond cleaning projects. They earn Rs. 12/day, but weekly they get only Rs. 50 in cash. The rest is paid in foodgrains. All their children come along to the worksite with them. They are skilled in agriculture and cattle care, but "we are ready to learn anything!"

Domestic workers

Mariamamma's mother worked as a domestic worker all of Mariamma's life. When she died, Mariamma took over her mother's job in same family. She was paid Rs. 150/month plus her food. The entire house and care of the family was her responsibility. "For everything, everybody top to bottom asked me for my help and support, even for my advice. I am happy there, and secure. They took care of me," she told the Commission when they met her in the Madras city meeting. After some years there, the daughter of the house got married to a rich man's son. The son-in-law began visiting the house. "After a while, he started coming frequently at the time I was all alone in the house. I started feeling very insecure and before anything could happen to me, I left the job. The lady was surprised, but she did not say anything to me." Now she goes to construction sites to work for Rs. 12/day. She said, with the great dignity she possessed, "It is very hard work for me, but I will get used to it."

In another meeting, in the Bangalore city slum, the Commission heard variation of the same theme. Saroja, a woman living there in the slum, starts her day at 5.30 a.m. She fetches 6-7 pitchers of water from the communal tap, cooks, bathes the children, feeds the family leftovers from the night before, and leaves the slum by 7 a.m. She spends Rs. 1.50 each day, going and coming between her place and her employer's house. When she arrives there, she makes their breakfast, takes the children to school, cleans the house, and cooks the evening meal. She gets two cups of tea and some leftover food during the day, and leaves by 6.30 p.m. She earns Rs. 85/month. She spends Rs. 45 of this on her bus fare. Her biggest grudge is that she is not allowed to go home when her children are ill. Or, if she insists, they deduct from her wages. When she told this part of her story, many of her colleagues stood up in the meeting and demanded a creche for their children.

Once Saroja had mentioned her frustration about her children being left alone, other women stood up to tell their problems. One of Saroja's 14 year old neighbours was beaten by her employer when she was accused of stealing a gold chain. They later found the chain with the employer's driver. Others mentioned sexual harassment in the families where they work, and all the ways they tried to make themselves invisible in the house, so they could get the work done without being molested. Many of them live in constant fear of either being sexually abused, or if they protest, of losing their jobs. Many complained about the lack of job security. None of them had

guaranteed employment from one day to the next.

Eighty-eight women from their slum row of 120 houses are domestic workers. They form a part of the 504 domestic servants who have unionized themselves in Bangalore to protest against the exploitative, oppressive conditions they are forced to work under. They have learned how to verbalize the oppressive situation that most of domestic workers have to suffer in silence. They have staged dharnas, and organized mass processions and public meetings to demand changes. They presented a memorandum to the Commission, stating their demands. They want the Labour Department to register all domestic workers. To accomplish this, they demanded a Commission be set up to:

- (a) Enumerate all the domestic workers in the city and inquire into the problems of domestic workers and their standard of living, and
- (b) recognize them as work force, and fix minimum wages for their work; grant welfare benefits such as bonus, gratuity, maternity benefits, health insurance, creches for their children, and housing facilities.

All 504 members signed or put their thumb prints next to their names, endorsing this document. It carries important messages that speak for all domestic workers.

When the Commission met the Central union representatives in Bombay they also were demanding recognition of domestic servants as "workers", and minimum wages of Rs. 750/month. They said the total number of domestic workers in Bombay was four lakhs, and 60% of them are women. They said women do part time work in up to 10 houses each earning Rs. 35 to 350/month. Full time workers earns Rs. 150-600. Most of them work from 5 a.m. to 11 p.m. Most of the Bombay domestic workers are illiterate, although third generation Bombay families has studied up to 9th standard. These women suffer from skin problems because of the caustic soaps and cleansers they work with all day, as well as weakness and spine deformities from constant work. They said an educated woman domestic worker would find it difficult to get an educated husband. Kesaibai mentioned about the lift sign at 7-storeyed building of Pedder Road where she works. It reads: "Servants — Dogs — Luggage: NOT ALLOWED".

Fatima also lives in the Bombay slum. Everyday she has to go to Mahim to work, which itself half an hour to walk from there. She leaves at 5.30 a.m. She works in a Muslim family's house, doing all the work from cleaning to cooking for Rs. 50/month. There are

several other workers like her in this neighbourhood. "We talk a lot about our problems with one another, but even if we tried to unionize, who would listen to us?"

One 39-year old woman Marry, shifts from working in upper class neighbourhood in Bombay or Delhi, to the slums, when she is out of work. She was educated to SSC in the convent in Goa, because both her parents died. She deserted her first husband and two daughters in Bombay, while she was working as a maid, because her husband was prostituting her at night to get money for liquor. She ran away after five years of this treatment. Then she went to Delhi with her second husband. After two years, he also started drinking. She got several jobs as nanny, with quarters provided, because she could speak and read English well. She lost several of these jobs because of her husband's drunken habits. Then she and her small son would go a month or two together with practically no food, while her husband bought his alcohol on credit. Her next job's first wages always went to repaying his debts. They moved often, looking for jobs for her. He died last year from alcoholism. She has mixed feelings of relief, and vulnerability. "Now for the first time in 30 years, I can save some of my wages, and we have enough food. But where will we go if this job ends? I have no family of my own to stay with, and without a husband, I am treated as 'available' property. I just want my hair to turn white. I want to become a 'sanyasi'."

In a Pune meeting, the Commission met a representative of the Pune Shahar Molkarin Sanghatana. They said there are 30,000 domestic maids in the city. They told how they had staged a ten day strike in 1986 to demand a 30 per cent rise in wages, one day off every fortnight, a bonus at Diwali, "proper respectful treatment," and no deductions for sickness. The strike had no immediate effect, but it gradually strengthened them and improved conditions. They have been demanding the Labour Commissioner for seven years to appoint a Committee to investigate their complaints, but no action has been taken.

Induben explained to the Commission how they handle their problems now, since they lack government support. Three or four of them will go together to one woman's employer, and demand better facilities or employment conditions. They said in 20 out of 25 cases, they meet with success.

Sukhavant is a Punjabi domestic worker in Rajasashi district Amritsar. She cleans vessels in three places. She gets Rs. 30/month and tea at each place. She has three sons, one of whom works in a repair shop. Her husband is 'away'. She has no land. She said her

priority is some alternative work, like weaving or dairying, "because I cannot stand the humiliation I always face when they scold me for no reason".

In Gauhati, Assam, social workers reiterated that one of the most exploited groups of workers is domestic maids. They average a monthly salary of Rs. 40-100. They have never tried to organize. Their one experience in fighting the system was when a woman was fired from her job for an alleged theft. A lawyer took up her case, and the court ordered her innocent, but because a domestic helper is not a "worker" they could not reinstate her.

Adalaxmi has been a domestic worker for five years, since her husband deserted her when she was pregnant. Her five-year old son goes to school. She works in two houses. She goes twice a day to each house, in the morning and evening. She does sweeping, washing, shopping, cooking, serves food and coffee. She brings home some of the food she makes for them. One household has four members, another eight. Each pays Rs. 50/month. At Christmas they give her a sari and clothes for her child. She is one Bangalore slum woman who thinks "there is no need to unionize". She was happy they raised her salary from Rs. 30 to 50 without her asking. She does not want to demand more, but hopes they will raise her salary to Rs. 60 next year. She said that her employers treat her well. They help her with Rs. 5-10 when her child is sick. She and her son stay with her mother in the slum. She pays Rs. 30/month for their hut. She said other domestic workers are better off because their husbands are also working. The biggest relief for her is that her son gets a mid-day meal in his school. "I am gone everyday from 6 a.m. - 8 p.m. At least I know he is being fed".

Adalaxmi's reistance to putting any demands to her employers is a sensitive issue for most domestic workers. Their jobs are the personal realm, and the treatment they receive from their employer, or even the job itself, is put at risk by asking for even as small consideration of fairer wages or hours. Many domestic workers have contradictory feeling of gratitude and resentment towards their employers. The gratitude is that they at least have a job, and some food and protection. The resentment stems from seeing that their employer's housework and childcare is being completely handled by them, while their own is completely unattended - at wages that can barely feed the children in the very brief time the mother is in her own house each day.

Endless Service

Satyamma is a traditional dai in the Ranga Reddy district of Andhra Pradesh. She has been helping women deliver their babies for 15 years with the skills she learned from her mother-in-law. She also received six months of additional training when she was a government functionary. Now she works for the government dispensary. There are dais in her village, from different castes. She is a scheduled caste, but all castes take her services. For each delivery in the village she earns Rs. 10 for a girl and Rs. 20 for a boy, even though "it takes the same amount of work". She found the training she received interesting and useful. "If I had a daughter-in-law, I could train her well" she said, in appreciation of both her training and her occupation.

Other women the Commission met who are participating in government service programmes faced greater frustration than Satyamma. In Jhilmili, Bankura district, West Bengal, four ICDS workers talked about some of their stumbling blocks. In the programme itself were holding aanganwadi for children of forest produce gatherers. They said the mothers were sending their children only at meal times and some were even taking the food home with them, so the purposes of nutrition and schooling were lost. Then they talked about their own work problems:

They said that as supervisors, they often to walk 7-8 miles between villages or communities. They said it is not always safe to travel like this. They have no common place to meet the other workers. The salaries of the aanganwadi workers are very low. An SSC pass gets Rs. 275 per month. After five years they get Rs. 330. Helpers gets Rs. 110. Both jobs are full time ones. In tribal areas where houses are very scattered, supervising 25 villages is difficult and less effective. If no transport is available, and they have to stay overnight, there is no accommodation for them. The stock of foodgrains they manager for lunch programme is a constant source of tension, "because people may get suspicious about their use." They said they very much like working with women health and extension workers. They suggested making a place in the village where they can stay together. Their priorities were better pay and accommodation.

In Bombay the Commission heard similar reports. ICDS aanganwadi teachers there also earned Rs. 275 (SSC pass) and Rs. 225 (non-SSC). Besides keeping 14 registers, doing health check-ups, dispensing medicines, and cooking and serving nutritious food, they teach. They were not even granted maternity leave until

last year. "The minimum pay should be Rs. 500/month," they told the Commission. "The present 'honorarium' (Maandhan') is no honor."

Other ICDS women in Coimbatore, Karnataka Kulu, H.P., and Rajasthan all presented memoranda to the Commission, demanding higher salaries, and recognition.

In Pune the Commission met Anuradha, a nurse working in rural health extension programmes. She offered a lot of opinions based on her experience in the field. First of all, recalling her time as a nurse in a private hospital, she said she had observed many suicidal tendencies amongst women due to their men's drunkenness. She suggested that the nurses' evidence should be recorded in such cases. Secondly, she was concerned about the nurses' security when they are working in the village. She suggested that the ANM, health workers, childworkers, teachers, gramsevikas, and other such women field workers should be provided a government house or hostel where they can all stay together. Thirdly, she suggested that health visits be given at women's work places, e.g., in the fields, rather than the village. She said during the day time, women are never found in their homes, while at the end of the day their free time is limited and they are tired.

While this health discussion was going on, Sushilabai mentioned the difficulties of the 800 hospital ayas attached to private hospitals in Pune. She said these ayas are not included as hospital staff in any regard. Even the unions refuse them membership. She gave a memorandum while a nurse complained about the contract systems both nurses and ayas were subjected to in the city's private hospitals.

Another group of women represented at this Pune meeting were the Devadasis, of whom there are many here. Most of them are girls of poor, landless, low caste families who dedicate their girls to the service of God. Their "services" are taken for granted by upper class men. Although this practice is sanctioned by tradition and religion, these women usually end up in prostitution or begging. There is no one to look after them when they grow old, and no source of income. Some of them develop diseases which remains untreated. In this meeting, they requested education for their daughters, old age homes, and some income generation programme. A blind woman asked for reservation for the blind in jobs, and special training in telephone exchanges, chalk making, or cane making.

At the Kolhapur Devadasi Vikas Centre, there were 50

devadasis present. Shantibai said that she was dedicated to the Devi because her father had promised (God) to do so if he got a son. Now her father is old and blind, and that son is in jail. The Commission heard numerous similar cases: they had been dedicated to God in exchange for a son.

Chhayabai and Ratnabai said they were made devadasis purely because of poverty. "There was not enough at home to feed everyone." So they lived in the temple and got fed there. At the age of 13 they started serving the devi with men, and started bearing children. In all cases, the men do not stay with the devadasi or the children. Then the devadasis have to resort to begging. On Tuesday and Friday near temples they have some income out of begging alms. A few get jobs as domestic workers. But generally they have lost their capacity to earn by hard honest labour. Their priority is education for their children, which is problematical. Because the father's name is not given, the children are often not admitted.

A social worker there complained that devadasis are not given assistance under IRDP. The Secretary of Social Welfare who was present gave her assurance that she would take up their case.

In Calcutta the Commission met a group of activists who were helping to organise women who work in brothels. They had written the Commission in Delhi, and were eager to discuss their work and have the Commission members meet some of these women. They went to the mohallas where many prostitutes are working. The air was heavy with bidi smoke and the smell of excessive, low-quality liquor, consumed both by the women and their clients.

Sandhya is a 35-year-old woman from Birbhum district. Her husband, became disabled 12 years ago in the village, and while his brothers support him, they had been harsh toward her daughter, saying they could not support them. She had to find her own means of livelihood, so she came to Calcutta searching for employment. She began working as a maid servant. She was looking for better work when a local woman told her she had a better job for her. She tricked her into coming to a brothel in Sonagachhi — a large red light district of the city.

Though the service rate was very high here, whatever she earned went directly to the brothel keeper. She was only left with food and the minimum required clothing. After a while she left this brothel for Sethi Bagan. She gets a lower rate here, but she is self-employed. The payment in this district ranges Rs. 15-50. The night before the Commission visited her, she had earned Rs. 30. She pays Rs. 12 per night to rent her space, plus electricity charges. Now she

is able to send Rs. 200 to her parents every month. She goes to her elder daughter's place during Pooja, and sometimes goes to her own village also. No one there is aware of her present vocation. No relative has ever come to visit her here. From her small savings she has bought a 1500 square feet plot in her mother's village. After her younger daughter's education is completed and she is married, she will settle on that land with her mother.

She said they suffer no harassment from either the police or the local 'dadas'. The women colleagues are helpful to each other in times of difficulty. Otherwise, they stick to their own business, because there is too much competition. Sandhya was not aware of any laws like SITA.

She visits a doctor for regular check-ups once every two months. It costs Rs. 30-50 with the doctor at the corner. Now that she has a better income, she can have meat, milk and fish to eat.

Shrimati came here from Bangladesh in 1947, when she was 16. Although she is nearing 60, she told the Commission she was 40. She was brought here by some people. She did not know where she was being taken. For the last 10-15 years she has stopped working. She stays in a very tiny place. One of her old clients who sell toys gives her Rs. 2-3 each day. She said she had a lot of problems: livelihood, ill-health, V.D. she complained that the general hospitals were very condescending to women like her. "We can be easily identified from our appearance, anywhere — from our dress, etc.," she said. Even at 60, she did not wish to dress like an "ordinary" woman.

Another young woman in that lane, sitting in a corner, looked depressed. She had fever for many days due to V.D. She said she was 22 and also from Birbhum district. She came here out of her own choice three years ago, because there was so much poverty and no work in her village. She is one of four sisters and two brothers. She said when she is unwell she does not take any customer, which means no income. Thus her small saving gets spent, because these days, she is sick on an average of 10 days a month. When she works, she gets an average of Rs. 15/day. She said if work were available, she would like to go back to her village. "But it will not happen," she said, "because the condition of my village is getting worse, not better."

The Commission later spoke to the Secretary of their organisation. Asha comes from Jessore, which is now in Bangladesh. Her mother-in-law was in this vocation and gave Asha this building. She has been working here for many years, and has given up prostitu-

tion herself. There are 50 members. They help those above 50 years old, like Shrimati, who no longer have an income, because there is no one else to look after them here. Most of them are ill. If not, they help them get domestic work. though they are not easily accepted in families. The organisation also helps with the children's education. They are planning boarding facilities for them. They have started a training centre in tailoring for the women and children. They have some funds collected from amongst themselves and the public. Political parties began intervening, but they refused their shelter. "Are they interested in us beyond our votes?" Asha asked. "For not joining them, we, of course faced some harassment — like a bomb blast in our lane, but our organisation is firm in not wanting any political affiliation."

She told the Commission members, "Girls come here because of poverty and unemployment. If one of them does not get a client for 2-3 days, she is ready to come down to Rs. 3 or 4."

The Commission also met dhobi women (laundresses) in many places, doing from one to all of the tasks involved in cleaning and ironing clothes. In Rajkot, due to scarcity of water, one couple was not taking up washing work. They were ironing clothes for their customers in a 400-unit housing quarters. The husband goes to collect and deliver the clothes, while she presses. She gets Re. 1 per sari, and 80 paise per shirt. She irons about 50 pieces of clothing a day, and this gives her work for 3-4 hours. They gross about Rs. 500/month, but after electricity charges, it comes to only Rs. 250-300.

Another laundress who also does ironing is taken advantage of because she is a lone woman. "My husband is handicapped, and because I am here alone people try to get work free, or on credit." Her relatives helped establish her ironing table. She earns about Rs. 350/month. Her three children go to school. "They are good in their studies, so I do not waste their time by making them help." She tried to get a bank loan earlier, but they demanded a guarantee, and she could not get one. She said there are too many dhobis in competition with one another for any of them to make a good income.

Another woman ironing clothes in the Bombay slum said she earns Rs. 15/day. She works from 7 a.m. on the table in front of her house. She said at night, her two children study on that table, and the family also eats on it. Her problem is to keep the customers' clothes away from all the dirt. This is a serious problem in the monsoon.

Jivuba is one of the many women cart pullers in Ahmedabad.

She has been doing this work since she was six years old — first with her mother, now with her husband. They earn Rs.45-50 daily between the two of them, pulling in the groundnut oil whole-sale market. They carry the oil between whole-saler and retailer, and do stacking work. She has had three children, with two miscarriages in between. She said she does not need any special food for this strenuous work, expect an extra pinch of jaggery now and then. The handcart is their own. Five years ago they were renting it for Rs. 45 per month. They are harassed constantly by the police, who do not allow them to park their cart. And she is annoyed at the frequently changing schedule of when traffic can pass on certain roads. "It should be announced in public when they are going to close certain roads. Otherwise we have to walk longer distances," she said. "And in this business, every step counts."

Each step also counts if you are a ragpicker like Ambaben. Her life is typical of the many ragpickers in our cities. She gets up at 4 a.m., drinks tea, and goes into the street with her bag slung over her shoulder. Sometimes her six-year-old son joins her. She picks up waste paper, rubber, iron, wood, leather — all from the streets, bending, lifting, filling her bag, bending, filling, lifting the ever-heavier bag as dawn breaks over the city. By 12 p.m. she is back home. She bathes, cooks, eats, and then carries her goods to the waste trader's place. She carries the previous evening's haul as well as that morning's. She puts what cash he gives her in pocket, and heads back to the streets to repeat the entire process of bending, filling, lifting, bending, examining, lifting, hoisting the full bag up. She returns home by 5.30 p.m., and once again, bathes, cooks, feeds her son, sorts the haul, and then goes to sleep by 9 p.m. Her daily earnings come to Rs. 8-10 — it all depends on what she finds. A big problem is the low price of wastepaper. At Kandla Port, wastepaper is now being imported, which Ambaben considers sinful.

In Jammu, the Commission met some sweepers in their meeting. Most were Christians, yet they were still treated as untouchables. A few were Muslims. They said that of the 700 sweepers working in the Jammu Municipality, women made up the majority. Their group leader Inayatbibbi said that right from the stage of getting a temporary job they have to face injustice and exploitation. To find a job, they have to give bribes of Rs. 1000-2000. Then they get only daily wage jobs. Some women who have been working for 30 years still are on daily wages. Because of these problems, all the workers, men and women, went on strike for five days. Ninety — all women — workers were thrown out. Lawyers helped to get them reinstated after two years, but not back wages were given. The victimized

women were ridiculed on all sides. They could not get domestic work during this unemployed period due to their "untouchability". Their priority was jobs for their educated daughters.

Other sweepers in Gandhidham, Kutch district, Gujarat, faced similar problems. These workers sweep the road for the Municipal Corporation. Hima was still considered part time after 18 years. She earns Rs. 20/day, but wants to be made permanent so that she is eligible for the benefits other employees get. Peva, a woman who has been working there for five years, said that every 15 days they give her a break in the work to maintain her 'casual' status. Her total monthly income comes to Rs. 500. She receives no bonus, leave, or medical benefits. She has made many representations, but has received no response except false promises.

Dock sweepers at Kandla Port have better circumstances than those Municipal employees. There are 39 old women, nearing 80 years of age, who are permanent employees of the port. They used to be loaders and unloaders, but due to old age they have been given lighter work. They have been working here as long as 22 years, they were made permanent only five years ago. Their gross salary is Rs. 1350, but after deductions they get Rs. 750. They said their condition has improved greatly only in the last few years. Earlier, no women were made permanent. There is still, however, a very large number of women employed as casual labour with the contractor. Like in the mines, there seemed to be a movement of voluntary retirement amongst the women. They said they wanted their sons to get employed now that they were growing old.

Other jobs involving women on the docks were iron scrap loading and sulphur loading. When the Commission met the iron scrap loaders, they found them handling the rough scrap with bare hands and feet, their legs exposed beneath their tucked up saris. They sat down to talk, and many hands and feet had old wounds and freshly bleeding cuts. A ship from Iran had dumped this scrap. They were unloading it from the dock into trucks. Twenty-three women load one truck, for which they receive Rs. 50 — that is Rs. 2 per woman. It is not regular work. When there are many trucks, they can earn upto Rs. 10-12 in a long day. Other times, there is no work for ten days together. They come from Taluka Sami in district Mehsana. A contractor based in Nadiad brought them here. There are seven contractors engaging 500 women here through a large labour supply company.

Kokila, the more articulate amongst them, said that she and some other women have been coming here for the last eight years.

They are landless weavers. Children are not allowed on the dock, so they stay home in the slum. The Commission visited them. Their slum is in a very bad condition. Toilets exist only in names were filthy and unfunctioning.

Another group on the docks were loading sulphur powder into trucks. They all told the same story — not enough work. The air is thick with sulphur. There was a yellow cloud engulfing everyone while the Commission members and the loaders were talking. It was like standing in an acrid dust storm — the sulphur got into the mouth, eyes, nose, ears, skin everywhere.

These women also work in groups. They have been earning Rs. 7/day for the last 7 years, when there is work. The Commission asked them where they left their children. "What children?" one asked, "Very few of us have had children since we started here. Because of this sulphur. It is 'garam' to the body. "The dock Doctor has confirmed this to them. One Commission member noticed that her white cotton sari had turned completely yellow when they left. She said today, "their wombs must look like this".

In the Pune meeting the Commission met the Hamal Panchayat, a union of hamal labourers who load and unload in the wholesale commodities market yards. Half of the members are women. They get up at 4 a.m., so they can begin work in the yards by 8.30. They work there till 7 or 8 p.m. They keep the yard swept, fill water, make tea, clean wheat, grains, pulses, coconut, and other produce. They collect samples and show them to the traders. It is a common yard for both industrial and agricultural products. They earn Rs. 4-5/day. They get to take some of the left over grains from the crevices of the floor and furniture. They have to respond to orders all the time. They do not get an official break during the day. There is no register to mark their presence, no wage slip, no fixed salary. Some seasons, they have to wait till 8 p.m. before they are excused. There is no shed or other facility for them to sit.

Sitabai has worked for 20 years in this yard, most of the time earning only Rs. 1-1.50. Her mother-in-law died under the pressure of bags of foodgrains which fell on her. The only compensation they gave was some firewood to cremate her. Sitabai's husband also works here as handcart puller. She recently underwent a operation, but got no medical support. Her divorced daughter also stays with her and works here. She said they used to be beaten and ill-treated. But now, because of the Hamal Panchayat, this has stopped. Instead of wages, they want monthly salary of Rs. 600-700, and only 8 hours of work a day.

Another kind of service job which provides seasonal work to women is cottonpod shelling. Women in Gujarat do this work for about 4 months each year. Some work right at the cotton gins, others work in their villages. They go to the cotton gins to fetch the pods, often walking long distances. They carry the bundle home, and old and young women and the children all work at unshelling the pods. Then they carry back the shelled cotton, collect payment, and carry home another load. They earn Rs. 2.50 for 20 kg. One woman with all her helpers can earn upto Rs. 4.00 a day like this. Working in the gin, you earn Re. 1 more, for sitting there from 7 a.m. — 5 p.m. But many women prefer to carry the work home, because then they can watch the children and employ their labour as well. They use the shells for fuel. Some women also migrate from Udaipur to do this work in Gujarat.

In Coimbatore district, the Commission met Shivbhagya, a roof-thatcher. she stitches 80 leaves together and sells the entire thing for Rs. 10. Villagers buy them like this, readymade, or she will go to their houses and fix their damaged ones. Alone, it takes her one day. If her son (14) helps, they can complete one roof in half a day. They receive Rs. 4 for this service.

Other urban women whom the Commission met were involved in food service work. One Madras woman, Padmavati, delivers lunchboxes to office workers from their homes. She has 10 customers, and she charges each Rs. 10/month, she carries them in a large basket on her head, and usually walks to save the transport charges of Rs. 1.60 by bus.

Bharani delivers milk from the booth to individual customers in Bombay. She charges Rs. 5/month per bottle. She earns Rs. 400-500 month, for 7 hours of work a day. She loses about Rs. 50 each month to breakage and spillage. Her shoulders and back ache constantly from the heavy load she walks with.

In Pune, Kaushalyabai works in a community kitchen. It is part of a scheme to provide snacks and lunches to workers for a reasonable price. She said hundreds of workers a day eat here, and the workers preparing the food and serving them now want a fixed salary.

An innovative project Rajamma took up in Hyderabad is a typing institute. She is an SSC failed who was working in an office for a private firm keeping accounts and typing. The firm closed down, so she got a loan from the Women's Development Corporation and opened this institute. She has bought eight typewriters. Thirty women and girls come for training. The house rent is Rs.

500/month, and her monthly loan repayment is Rs. 500. She said so far, there is no income left after paying these two expenses.

FACTORY WORKERS

Ramilaben is a textile mill worker in Gujarat who attended the Commission's Ahmedabad meeting. She said that she is one of 200 women in her area who are contract labourers. They work "outside" the mills, though they are on the same premises. They enter their workplace through separate gates from the regular mill workers. She is doing the exact same operations which are being done in the mill — only she works under a contractor. She earns Rs. 5-8/day, without welfare benefits or job security, while women who work in the mill proper earn Rs. 30/day at the same jobs. She said that she and the other women under the contract system have joined all the unions operating in these mills, but none of them have taken up their problems. This is also the case with the Labour Department — their case has been pending there for seven years.

This kind of informal "factories" exist all over the country. The employer hires contractors to fill his labour needs, while keeping his official muster roll small, to avoid any of the formal responsibilities that legislation requires of him. He hires all the women on a piece-rate basis which daily amounts to anywhere from 20-50% of the daily minimum wage in a particular area.

In a Karnataka hosiery in Belgaon, the tactics were to list fewer than ten workers to avoid legal obligations. The Commission saw many more workers than this, which did not even include all the homebases workers who did joining, buttonholing, pressing and labelling. No one received a bonus, provident fund or a regular salary. Men earned higher than women. None of the management wanted to answer any of the Commission's questions.

The place where the biggest concentration of factory piece-rate workers is occurring is in Kandla Free Trade Zone. The Commission visited one garment factory where 2500 workers were employed to make fashion garments for export. 1800 of these employees were women. This mill factory recruits their workers through Mahila Mandals and Panchayats. They then provide bus transportation for the workers, to and from their villages. It costs them an average of Rs. 7 per person per day. Girls are often trained in the Mahila Mandals in tailoring. If not, they undergo 3-4 months of training in the factory itself. Salaries, all on piece-rate, range from Rs. 250-400 per month. A few very experienced workers can earn up to Rs.700, if they work hard. They get 19 per cent bonus, and

provident fund.

At the Milton factory, young women were manufacturing blue jeans. The entire process is divided into 19 different operations, each performed by a separate operator. Kalpana, from Hachan village has been doing one stitching operation for five years, and earns Rs. 307/month. Rama is also from the same village, and after three years is earning Rs. 225. Ruksana irons 200 jeans daily in a large industrial presser for Rs. 280/month. Valli had come from Madras. Her husband was working in the Railways, so they were posted in Bachali village. She has worked here for four and a half years. She learned how to use the pressing machine in two days and has done that job ever since. She started at Rs. 260/month, and gets a 20 per cent increase each year, so she is now earning Rs. 320. Baijvati from Kukan is stitching on the most sophisticated sewing machine in the world. It took her 15 days to learn, after her training in the Mahila Mandal. She studied upto 10th standard, and there was no opportunity for her in her village. She makes Rs. 325/month. Many other girls were well below 18, though when asked, always replied "18". Many who answered "18" also said they had working there 2,3, or up to five years.

The management faces no labour problem. They suggested to the Commission that vocational training schools at the village level should be opened. "Then, if those students are found suitable, we will recruit them," they rationalized.

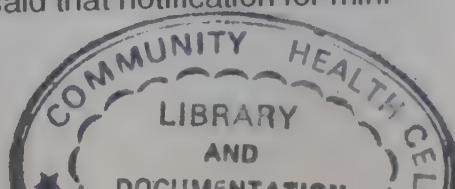
"Will you fund the school?" the Commission asked.

"What about the government, like the Social Welfare Department?" the manager asked. "This will solve your unemployment problem in rural areas," he added condescendingly.

At another factory in the Free Trade Zone, where fluorescent switch gears are manufactured, the Commission met 32 women doing the finer production work. They start at Rs. 8/day plus transport. After a year they are supposedly made permanent, but only 12 of the 250 workers here had achieved that status. Champa was not even getting the transportation benefit. They consider three miles distant too close to qualify, so she walks every day. Another woman there for 4 years was still temporary, getting Rs. 230/month. Both these women had been deserted by their husbands and were staying with their parents.

The Commission took up these issues with the Development Commissioner. Both the general public and the employers think the FTZ is a special exception, and that labour laws do not apply there. He agreed that this is a problem and said that notification for mini-

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imum wages is under way. He also added that this industry does provide good employment opportunities for a backward region like Kutch, defending their policy of not adhering to legislation, and not allowing workers to strike. When they had filed grievances and demands for creche, the employers simply escaped their responsibility by paying a fine of Rs. 50-100. Instead of taking the Commission's queries seriously, they moved on to proudly display the graphs showing financial progress and their contribution to the national economy. At the end they did promise to plan welfare activities for the workers.

At a match factory in Quilon, Kerala, the Commission saw women making bundles of match boxes. Most of them were 16-17 years old, earning Rs. 10/day. Men earned Rs. 15. Women also operate the machines which produce the cut match sticks. They earn 17 paise per gross of sticks. They can cut 50 gross/day, earning about Rs. 8.50. Men prepare the solution phosphorous, and women dip the match sticks. It affects their throats, they said, and they regularly have to take medicines for it. The management complained that in the neighbouring states, minimum wages are not paid, like they are here, and this makes it very difficult to compete with them.

At a Kerala State Cashew Corporation Ltd. factory near to the match factory, the Commission met 350 women working at shelling, peeling, grading and packaging cashews. This is one of 34 factories under this corporation.

About 200 women were working in a large, poorly lit room, squatting on a small plank and sharply tapping the cashew nuts with a heavy stick, and quickly shelling them. The room was filled with the constant tapping of their tools. They get Rs.9/day, plus 76 paise for each kg. they shell. It generally comes to Rs.15/day. Sumati has been doing this work for 16 years. She starts at 6 a.m. each day, and earns Rs.40-45/week for 4-5 months a year. She is not getting benefits of ESIS because she is working in this 'seasonal' industry.

A different group of women is involved in peeling the thin skin off the nuts and grading them according to size and quality. They earn about Rs.14/day on piece rate, but this work is available for only two or three days a week during the five-month season. These workers also complained that they wanted ESIS benefits, regular work, and finger caps, to protect their hands from the fluid of the nut.

In Jammu and Kashmir the Commission visited the Ganderbal Industrial Training Institute, where a soap factory was being run by the Central Social Welfare Board. Even young women from farmers'

families were working there. They were manufacturing and packing Sunlight Soap for Hindustan Lever Co., which supplies the raw materials, machinery, and packaging materials. The CSWB financed the workshop. Women earn Rs.230/month, and their capable manager, Sarla, gets Rs.420. They are not yet keen on producing their own raw materials, which is the ultimate goal of the project, so they can be an independent manufacturing unit.

At Jammu the Commission visited the Chinar Biscuit Factory. 350 workers are employed there, 100 of them are women. They are operating the machines, packaging, headloading and cleaning. All the supervisors were men. These women liked working here because there are regular hours, and the working conditions are pleasant and hygienic. They earn Rs.11.50/day, one month of leave a year, and one month of maternity leave. The women said they want creche facilities. The manager disagreed by saying, "I offered them creche facilities, but they said they preferred to keep their children at home". Their main priority is a stable monthly salary.

Two women in the Bombay slum meeting told the Commission about their jobs as leather workers. They daily go to workshop run by a contractor for eight hours of stitching chappals. They join the strap to the sole. These are of cheap quality. The women are paid Rs.10/day. They suffer pain in their fingers and palms for this work. There are not any facilities for them in the shed. The chappals are supplied to some factory which the women do not know.

Another factory job women from this slum are involved in is cleaning empty oil cans in godowns. In one godown, eight women are working together every day. They have to clean 1200 cans a day (about 150 per woman). They earn Rs.18/day and suffer burned hands from the caustic soda they use for the work. Komal said she has to take her four children to the godown with her because there is no one to look after them at home.

GENERAL ISSUES

During the Commission's tour, we saw women working in their workplaces. We talked with them in meetings and sat with them in their homes to learn about their problems. We tried to listen attentively to each woman's words, to understand her thoughts and feelings. We found that these women are very busy people — busy generating income, and busy saving on expense, because any money saved is money gained. Her sole purpose is to protect her family from hunger and to enable them to survive their poverty.

We witnessed over and over again that the work of millions of

such women is not recognized as "work", either by her or by the society. Our over-riding impression was that these women's work brought very little income to them. They have nothing that can be called their own except their children about whom each woman goes on saying, "my own". These women have no other assets.

PERFORMANCE OF LAWS, POLICIES, AND PROGRAMMES

The Government of India, no doubt, is conscious of the conditions existing amongst these women. To improve their status, laws have been enacted, policies formulated, programmes established and funds allocated. The Constitution of India upholds our ideals that these women should have equality and justice. Laws like the Minimum Wages Act are meant to ensure women their due return for the labour they put in. The Equal Remuneration Act is meant to equalize women's and men's payment for similar work. The Contract Labour Act was passed to remove the exploitation of middlemen. These are just a few of many such protective legislations enacted to help these workers. Social security schemes, supportive health policies and innumerable anti-poverty programmes like IRDP, TRYSEM, DWACRA, and the like aim at certain targets to uplift women from poverty. These programmes reach out to uplift women who are workers in the unorganized sector. They are often extremely poor, and they are women, so their vulnerability is great.

This Commission was established to observe how this "uplift" is progressing on a national scale. The following is what we witnessed during the Commission's tour regarding the performance of these laws, policies, and programmes aimed at women.

EQUAL REMUNERATION

Virtually nowhere did we find equal wages being paid to men and women for the same work — not in *any* occupation. Even in States where women's status is not that low, like Nagaland, Manipur, and Assam, women do not receive equal wages. It is not only private employers who practise this discrimination. Co-ops are also at fault. Even when the Government is the employer, the payment to women is less than to men *for the same work*. The dimly few exceptions to this rule were found in Himachal Pradesh. As many times as we probed, as many times as we witnessed women doing the exactly the same labour and putting in the same hours as men, nowhere were we given any satisfactory answer as to why they are being paid less.

MINIMUM WAGES

We found employers paying attention to the Minimum Wages Act only long enough to discover all the ways they can avoid implementing it. Only in Kerala and a few places like Nipani where strong unions exist, is this Act in effect. Even bodies serving the poorest, like KVIC fail to provide minimum wages, as ardently reported by tassar reelers in Bihar.

The Famine Relief Programme proved to be one of the biggest defaulters. In Gujarat, not only do they waive legal wages and give a fraction of the minimum, but even regular work is being transferred to Famine Relief Work, so that payment to workers can be lowered. Many workers continue in the same jobs they have done for months or years, at half their former salary, because now it is "Famine Relief". As 60% of the workers on these sites are women, they are affected the most. We could not understand how anything less than the Minimum Wage could be justified. At Famine Relief worksites in Rajasthan, we saw that the workers were not paid in cash at all, only in foodgrains. For cash, they are forced to sell foodgrains.

In the numerous economic activities we observed, that most occupations are not covered under the state schedule of minimum wages. For example, garment makers, papad rollers, block printers, loaders and unloaders, domestic servants, and innumerable others have no fixation of minimum wage. We encountered many local groups working to combat their exploitation by demanding fixation of minimum wages and other kinds of protection. The domestic workers in Pune and Bangalore, garment workers in Gujarat, fishnet makers in Kerala, and silk reelers in Bihar are a few of those involved in this struggle. The others, who are still too vulnerable to demand any change, are too many to mention.

A clever observation applying across the country was that wherever we found women working in the unorganized sector at occupations which were covered by Minimum Wage legislation the workers had all been switched by their employer to a piece rate basis.

In Maharashtra, women made a very astute suggestion. They said that the minimum wages for homebased workers should be higher than the factory workers, as the former have to use their own space, light, utilities, and equipment, while factory workers do not incur these additional expenses. "Why should the employers be subsidized by the home workers?" They asked, "Homebased work should be made costlier than factory work for the employer, then let him choose between the two."

SOCIAL SECURITY

Whether women are working in occupations where social security legislation exists or does not exist, the benefits are virtually zero. Maternity benefits, creches at the worksites, medicare, accident compensation or even occupational safety measures are simply unheard of. We could not differentiate the workers in the formal sector from those of the informal sector in terms of their contribution to the economy. Yet, social security schemes are non-existent or, if existing, insignificant, ill-conceived, delayed or simply not implemented for the unorganized sector women. Into this category fit examples like the old age pension scheme in U.P. and Tamil Nadu, the widowhood pension in Bihar and Kerala, and the maternity benefits for agricultural workers in Gujarat. Neither the Employment Guarantee Schemes or the Famine Relief Works have provided the legally required creche facilities. And Municipal employees working as sweepers have been kept on daily wages and granted none of the benefits granted to all the other employees. After 16 years of sweeping work in the Gandhidam Municipality or 32 years in Jammu, women are still only daily wage workers.

Because bidi workers are now almost completely shifted to home based contract system employment, they too are being denied social security benefits. They are paid entirely on piece rate, or under an "innovative" new system of "sale-purchase" whereby the principal employer can never be legally pinpointed. His guile is supreme. Despite the two good, clear pieces of legislation to protect wages, working conditions, and social security benefits — with inspectorate machinery under the state labour department — the employer's exploitation is still pervasive. The simplest measures, like identity cards, have not even been made for most workers. Scholarships for workers' children and medicare are vague dreams to most workers. The Government encourages bidi workers cooperatives to combat these problems, yet refused to market their products. Such half-hearted attempts hardly serve the purpose.

The standard reply when the Commission probed into the lack of social security or minimum wage was: "The Labour Department has not received any such complaints, Madam". Do we wait till the complaint is received? Will these women ever be strong enough to complain and risk losing their work? This is the climax of insensitivity and inaction on the part of the Government. It is equally unfortunate to say that when the Government is the employer, it is also a serious defaulter in implementing these laws.

WORKERS' EDUCATION PROGRAMME

This Labour Ministry programme is not reaching women workers in the unorganized sector, except for some bidi workers in M.P., Gujarat and Maharashtra. Those engaged in home-based occupations like gathering forest produce or raising livestock, or doing domestic work in others' houses, etc., are not yet perceived as "workers", and thus not eligible for the programme. This problem of perception on the part of the policy makers towards the unorganized sector, and towards women in general exists at every other level down the line.

WOMENS' ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT CORPORATIONS

Only a few states have established Women's Corporation. Although this Corporation was established for economic uplift of women, it is not satisfactorily reaching out to poor women and helping them to develop their productivity or income, or lending them support in eradicating middlemen, contractors, or money-lenders. Nor has the Corporation taken up the cause of women's displacement from work with the government, or rehabilitated the displaced ones in alternative employment.

WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION

Women's representation at every level except that of the worker is largely absent. It is a serious omission in policy when women are not included in democratic bodies like cooperatives. Requisites like ownership of a loom to be eligible for representation in weavers' cooperative eliminates women members in 90% of the cases. In many states, men traditionally is at the loom, so ownership is considered to be theirs. This policy does not give any credit to women's arduous and skilled preweaving preparation work which is integral to weaver's work. Similar problems exist in the Dairy and Fishery cooperatives. Even when no assets are involved, like in Handicrafts Cooperatives, women are still not taken as members. The integrated nature of men's and women's work is not represented in non-integrated cooperatives.

Another place where segregation blocks women's participation is at local government levels. In most states, a statute requires one or two women to be on the village panchayat. We searched out these members in the majority of locations we visited, and were extremely disappointed to find them as either non-existent, or partially non-participatory members.

In a State like H.P. where Mahila Mandals are strong and vocal women want the Mahila Mandals, to have authority equal to the Panchayat, because they feel that they are more knowledgeable about women's issues.

In other states like Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra even separate state Boards like those of Mathadi workers or Construction workers suffer from lack of women's representation. Hence women are now demanding that new Boards have an equal percentage of women board members as the percentage of women workers in that occupation. For example, women domestic workers and women construction workers often make up more than half the labourers in these occupations, and they want their numbers reflected in the Boards.

The few niches that women have carved out for themselves as government functionaries, teachers, work supervisors, field workers, health workers, and extension workers - moving about in twos or threes in rural areas, meeting in the homes of village women and helping them to look after their children helping them acquire better health and employment opportunities these are the examples that need to be multiplied through all levels of policy. These women make good impressions on rural women. Usually, the District Collectors are appreciative and supportive of their work. They are appreciated in the communities where they work, and are not perceived as "Sarkari".

WOMEN'S PERCEPTION OF GOVERNMENT

The common working women's perception of government is through police, forest guards, and court or family planning functionaries. She does not think the 'Sarkar' as a friend or protector of the weak. No one has seen a Labour Inspector in their village or mohulla. Forest authorities are generally harsh to the local population, generating hostility between the two groups. Beating and harassment from the authorities are deeply internalized by the women. The Forest Development Corporation's major purpose of providing fair prices for forest products and eliminating middlemen has not been realized.

ANTI-POVERTY PROGRAMMES

We found that the directive to reach at least 30% women beneficiaries has initiated efforts to reach out to women though this target is not yet being met. Women's record in loan repayment has been commendable in many states, and has given officials confidence to pursue the measure. Voluntary Agencies issuing loans

have also experienced positive results. Some innovative coordination of various government departments, like in the Baster (M.P.) Secriculture Project, have created well-balanced, integrated programmes.

DWACRA groups of West Bengal have been successful in helping women produce quality products and find local markets. In Punjab, the Women's Economic Development Corporation has been linked with DWACRA to successfully secure markets through government contracts.

In Orissa, one District Collector helped tribals get loans by providing them a guarantee through collective land ownership. A senior government official there seriously suggested giving assets in the name of women, as they are more dependable. All industrial units in Orissa which are taking loans have to compulsorily recruit 10% women for employment.

West Bengal has a directive stating that if any cooperative is not registered within 3 months, the group can go to the Tribunal. The effectiveness of the directive is exposed in the complaint of a broom cooperative which in spite of dharnas for three years, is still unregistered. Out of 280 registered women's cooperatives, 163 are lying defunct. This requires serious consideration — what is ailing in cooperative policy towards women?

The major problems of IRDP are that women are not being considered eligible for loans because their husbands have defaulted with the bank. The problems that caused him to default are often the same problems that cause him to default in supporting his family (i.e., illness, alcoholism etc.) and are the very reason the woman needs a loan to support the family herself. There still prevails the attitude that women are not economic contributors, despite all the evidence to the contrary. Innumerable times we also heard that "because we have no house or assets, we were not granted the loan".

In Manipur, women were unhappy with the village Padhan's selection of beneficiaries for IRDP loans. The women were demanding the selection process be granted to the Mahila Mandals jurisdiction. Their other policy suggestions were similar to those heard in Unhrul, Assam — that the banks' policy to not lend outside a 16 km radius should be changed in the cases of hilly areas. Women in H.P. suggested uplifting the poverty line in hilly areas, as their cost of living is higher, and this line affects their ability to get loans.

We heard numerous accounts of TRYSTEM projects where there has been no follow up. They have been giving very limited, stereotyped training to women, like in tailoring and knitting, with no

tie-up either to raw-material supply at the front end, or marketing at the back. They have had no co-ordination with other departments which could lend useful technical advice. Receiving training in skills whose market is beyond the women's own control has not been useful, but frustrating. Training in upgrading women's existing skills seems to have been the most successful. Rural women everywhere complained that they could not go to the bank three or four times just to acquire the loans.

Positive examples were found in Tamil Nadu and Karanataka where the governments are engaging women in sericulture projects, and developing their skills through effective extension work. In Bihar and Andhra Pradesh, the government recognizes rural women's extensive contribution to dairying. Besides, promoting women's dairy cooperatives in a big way, they have helped them manifest successfully by providing the necessary infrastructural facilities. In all these cases, women took good advantage of everything the programmes offered them.

INDUSTRIALIZATION

Mechanization has played havoc with many women's occupations and lives. Women working in mines, tobacco processing, agriculture, and docks have been displaced by conveyor belts and other automatic machinery. Industrialization eats up both their agricultural lands, and their work places. Cement factories in U.P. and H.P. and zinc factories in Rajasthan have ruined agricultural land and labour opportunities. Industrial farming in Punjab has largely displaced women's agricultural labour. Certain government laws and policies promoting industrialization, modernization and voluntary retirement have been detrimental to women's employment. It often reduces them to a contract labourers, below any legislative protection. Other women have found their jobs displaced by machines being operated only by men.

Women also have the intelligence and desire to progress into these jobs. In Himachal Pradesh women requested for tractors which would be suitable to hilly farming. The extensive milk markets for dairy women would not be possible without infrastructural facilities. Many women now contributed technical and scientific skills to sustain these operations. And how delighted we were to meet the 143 tribal women in Kaliapani mines in Orissa, having regular jobs with Rs. 600/month salaries wearing their helmets and boots, and commuting on bicycles from the village to the mines, every day.

ACCESS TO RESOURCES

Despite the fact that women work with land, cattle, looms, fish, textiles etc., they are seldom the owners of these resources. For many women in the unorganized sector, there are other valuable resources which they also have very limited access to — market space, work space, licences, training, and markets for the production — all things would improve their economic future. Then there are the daily necessities to which many Indian women devote major portions of their time and energy acquiring — fuel, fodder, food and water. This section will summarize our observations regarding women's access to these kinds of resources.

LAND

Land is rarely in women's names. Only in the case of widows, usually with no sons, is it listed under her name, and she can only rarely, with great difficulty, retain it in her name. In West Bengal's recent land reforms, like Operation Burga, share-croppers registered for land ownership are always men, despite the fact that women have also devoted their entire lives to cultivating and nurturing this land. In Andhra Pradesh, landless women struggling for their rights under the Bonded Labour Act tell similar stories, with added lists of atrocities inflicted on them and their families for even attempting to assert their legal right.

Wherever collective tribal lands are being privatised, women are losing status because they are being registered under the men's names. Previously, all tribal members were considered and landholders — women and men.

WATER

Drinking water cries in dry and drought prone areas, or hill areas have the worst impact on women's economic and personal lives. Walking 3-4 kms. to fetch water is common. In Jodhpur district, Karikhurd village was a heart rending example. Because of the prolonged drought, the Harijan well was completely dry, and the other well had only a puddle in a small depression at the bottom. When we arrived there, women were balancing on the narrow stone tip of the well, throwing their small tins attached by strings down into the puddle. All their strings became entangled, and arguments broke out in their competition for this scarce resource. When each woman drew out her makeshift tin, she would empty it into her waiting vessel, spilling some on to her skirt. After many refills, she would

then wring her skirt into the vessel as well. Harijans were at the mercy of the higher caste women to empty one or two or three precious tins into their vessels. They could not draw the water themselves, because, as they said. "If we pollute well, we may be cursed by God." Many women had fresh injuries and bandages from their physical fights over the water, and the month before our visit, one pregnant woman had fallen into the well and been killed. (Despite the severity of their crisis, they overwhelmed us by offering each of us a big glass of sweet red coloured water, fresh flowers and songs!).

Subhadra of Sirmour spends the entire day fetching water for her family of thirteen. They require 130 buckets a day. Even Kerala is experiencing water scarcity this year. Bombay slum women asserted that water is often cause of local riots. And some Punjabi women told of their difficulties now that their local water supply has been diverted to a military cantonment.

FUEL AND FODDER

This resource is the source of constant worry due to constant retreat of the forest from every pocket of the country. Despite women having to walk as far as 20 kms. in Rajasthan for fuelwood, the men do not help the women in this task. U.P. Garhwal women also complained that deforestation was forcing them to walk farther and farther each year.

For want of fodder, women taking IRDP loans for cattle and dairy projects often suffer - especially the landless women, or those experiencing the scarcity of drought times. Women have invariably responded positively to programmes, which help them like plant fuel wood, fodder, fruit, bamboo, and mahua trees or making smokeless chullahs.

TOILETS

Villages plots reserved for toilets are getting smaller and smaller, usurped for other purposes, or filled up. This forces women to line up in the dark, along roadsides, to relieve themselves. This is the most acute problem for urban slum women or people living in resettlement colonies. If there are toilets, they are characterized by interminable queues, no doors, and filth. If there are no toilets or they are no longer functional, the entire colony is prevailed with the stench, and heavy tolls are exacted of the resident children's health. Men can relieve themselves when out or at work, but because many women work at home, they suffer more. As one

Bombay slum woman said, "Forget the house, just give me a toilet of my own." Bathing place is another necessity, which when lacking, creates many unspoken tensions amongst residents.

SPACE

For homebased workers, space is an urgent need. Scrap collectors, furniture makers, and weavers need space to process their goods. Vendors need market or street space, preferably in a consistent location, so they can build up a clientele. Big cities and downtown markets have been consistently removing hawkers from the market places and roads, where their "encroachment" hinders the smooth flow of traffic. City planners and market architects have not taken into account the thousands of existing vendors in the city. They cry for 'two baskets worth' of space, nothing else. We heard this cry ardently from vegetable, fruit, flower, egg and fish vending women in every city we visited. The Imphal Women's Markets is an ideal for other cities in the country. It is the last one which is properly maintained.

Because all slums are work centres where people are busy producing, processing and storing raw materials and finished goods to earn some income, slum dwellers are incredibly vulnerable to eviction. Not only do they lose their homes when this happens. They lose all their capital, and also their workplace. Without a workplace they cannot dry papad, or blockprint in Bombay, they cannot spread cloth to do chikan embroidery in Lucknow, crochet lace in Bhagalpur, stitch garments in Ahmedabad weave a shawl in Hyderabad, vend firewood in Madras, run a cane shop in Bangalore. For lack of workspace, banks do not trust their stability to grant loans.

RAW MATERIALS

We observed that for artisans producing utility items like brooms and baskets, small furniture, quilts, iron utensils, garments, woven products, pottery, shoes and food items — their main problem is availability of raw material, and the price of it. They have no problem marketing their products (if they get space), if they had an assured supply of their required raw materials, at a reasonable and fixed price, they would need nothing else. Their recurring demand to us was for a policy that ensures them the first claim to the raw material from the source of those who are the actual producers. An additional suggestion was that yarn should be supplied to weavers from the local ration shops, at cheaper prices. In

Gujarat we saw that the State Textile Corporation had assured the supply of chindi and cut pieces to women's cooperatives at a fixed, low price. That policy has helped the actual stitchers to eliminate middleman agents at the procurement level, increasing their profit margin.

MARKET

Craftswomen who produce decorative items find difficulty marketing their goods directly to the consumers. Also, ill-conceived projects of voluntary agencies, DWACRA groups, and Mahila Mandals have faced problems of marketing their goods, and have surplus goods stocking up. The government of Gujarat has a commendable Resolution which has helped strengthen many small women's groups and coops. If there is a women's organization providing goods or services, the resolution requires the government to buy from the women's group without taking any tender. This has created greater employment opportunities for many women.

In many places, women have demanded special or separate markets to help fight discrimination, intimidation, and injustice, e.g. tie and dye women of Jodhpur, and bidi women in Tamil Nadu, women in Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh have demanded sheds in industrial estates at affordable rent.

CREDIT

All over, both the rural and urban working women whom we met, suffered from lack of access to credit. Their need is very small. Clara of Bangalore needs Rs. 35 to double her income, or an idli vendor requested Rs. 150 to be able to store her supplies. The interest that slum women pay is simply unthinkable — from 2% per day to 20% per day. In Tamil Nadu, the price of a loan in emergency is pawning a child's labour. Most of the rural poor do not know that no guarantee is needed for them to acquire a loan. Unmarried daughters are not granted loans by banks. In general banks hesitate to lend to women, despite the evidence that in most cases women have proved themselves good repayers. There is also little encouragement coming from banks for women to open deposit accounts. Voluntary organizations involved in women's savings have recognized women as good savers. And most of all, credit is a major resource that helps women to develop self-reliance and more effective ways to contribute to the economy.

LICENCES

We learned that women actually need licences to pick rags. Despite our surprise, vendors and hawkers all want these licences, for some security in their own regular place, and for when they travel outside to village haats. They are ready to pay licence fees for such a security. Without this kind of identification/legitimation, they get endless harassment for bribes.

IDENTITY CARDS

For homebased workers, the equivalent to licences for hawkers are identity cards. These both establish their "worker" status and entitle them to their legal security in times of need. Homebased workers in every state made demands for identity cards issued in their own names.

TRANSPORT

Fish vendors are in urgent need of reliable transport facilities as they are continually losing their market to frozen fish vendors. Vegetable growers, or hawkers who sell in the city markets also need public transport which they are entitled to use.

HOUSING

Indira Awas Yojna has been well received by the poor, but once again, it is not granted in women's names. In Rajasthan, we met a woman who was driven out from her house, which was in her husband's name. She had been the sole supporter of the family for many years while he was ill and unemployed. To combat this kind of injustice, a voluntary organization in Orissa recommended that "all government assets should be given in the first name of the women, as women are more steady in employment, and usually stay in the village."

In the Bangalore and Madras slums, women were allotted plots of land for housing, but they were too poor to invest in the housing (Rs. 9,000). Hence they are often compelled to succumb to the pressure from others for benami sale.

CRECHE

Women have so greatly internalized the care of their children as their absolute responsibility, they have not come forward to demand the service as their legal right. Also they are not confident of the quality of care such a service could provide. Hence, no very articulate demands have formed around this issue, despite the in-

tensity of their need. The issue of feeling that their own children were neglected was topmost in all the domestic workers' minds. For women like these, even so small a service as the midday meal at school is to be greatly appreciated, and affords her some mental relief while she is away from her children all day.

On Famine Relief and Employment Guarantee Scheme Worksites 50%-60% of the workers are young, able-bodied women who have infants and children. Many of them are brought to worksite, where there is not even a shed to put them in. Despite the Scarcity Relief Code which provides that a shed, drinking water, and creche be available for workers, none existed on the worksites that we visited in Rajasthan, Gujarat or Maharashtra. Nor did we see creches in biscuit factories in Jammu, in the cashew factories in Kerala, in the Free Trade Zone in Gujarat, in the Tobacco Processing Factory in Nipani, or in the bidi factory in Ahmednagar. As long as women remain torn between needing to provide for their children, and having to neglect them for their job, they have little chance of developing as whole, confident mothers and workers.

RATION CARD

The Public Distribution System was working in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Punjab, where women in every meeting had and used ration cards. Elsewhere, the picture was bleaker. Migrant labourers had no ration cards. They had to buy supplies from the outside shops, where "each time the wages rise, the price of rations immediately rises too." In the West Bengal, meeting of 60 forest produce collectors whose average income was Rs. 15/week, only one woman held a ration card. In Orissa, where 160 rural met in Ganjam district, only 18 had cards. In Uttarkhand village, U.P., none had cards. Some who had previously had them, had pawned them for Rs. 20 to the ration shop or the grocer, and not been able to recover them.

BETTER TOOLS

We saw women using primitive tools to carve out their living. And all of them are ready to learn to use any new tool that would increase their productivity and income, but most do not know how to go about acquiring such tools and skills. They need to have their skill and equipment upgraded according to their own capacity and circumstances. They appreciate technology like smokeless chul-lahs, and handpumps, and grain processors. Better tools does not mean they need power based equipment — just shaper knives and

awls to help them cut their leather and stitch their shoes. Or affordable tables to do their printing and embroidery work on.

Women's right to employment, to income, and to assets must be recognized to help them move ahead. Access to assets, to any tool or any resource that will help bring them into the mainstream, and into our visibility is a must.

WOMEN'S AWARENESS

During our Commission tours, we spent a good deal of time questioning women about their awareness levels. We were interested in their literacy rate, and what their attitudes to education were — both for themselves and their daughters. We were always curious which government programmes they were aware of. We questioned them about their communication networks — how did they get important news or information, who read newspapers, or saw television, or what kind of programmes did they listen to on the radio. And finally, what were their perceptions — about these programmes, and about themselves, as women and workers, in relation to these issues?

Women's literacy level was very low amongst the women we met in Rajasthan. In meeting with 215 women there, only four were literate. They said frankly, "We do not want to send our daughters to school after 1st standard, because they need to be trained in work." They were interested in further training to upgrade their skills, but, only if it was offered in their own villages. Most of them showed preference for work outside home. In one of these meetings where 40 women were present, none of them read newspapers or listened to the radio, except to an occasional play at night. "Our sons bring important news to us," they told us. In another large meeting of 250 women, 25 of them listened to radios, and 25% sent their daughters to school. Only one read news. The rural women did not know about the minimum wage rate or anything about equal remuneration admissible to them as workers. The tie and dye women at these meetings were aware of the sources of their raw materials, and the market, but they have no capital of their own. Leather and aritari women are aware both of the market price, and thus, of their own exploitation, but they also feel powerless due to not having working capital.

In Ukhrul, Manipur, of the 70 women we met, six were literate, and only two or three knew about IRDP and TRYSEM. They all knew about their District Autonomous Council there and how it functioned. In Imphal, 67 of 70 knew how to read and write, and all of

them there were aware of IRDP and TRYSEM — in fact, they complained of the corruption and delay in these programmes.

Though almost half of the women we met in Nagaland were literate, they were not aware of IRDP and TRYSEM. They did not know about loans, laws, or the scholarships specially available to them to study anywhere in India. They had no exposure to training of any kind. Only very few read newspapers, and none had access to radios or TVs. They generally lacked communication with other areas.

We held six different meetings with women in Assam. We learned that about three-fourths of them were literate, and one-fourth of them knew about TRYSEM and IRDP. Some of the women present had learned account keeping and management skills following their TRYSEM training, but they complained that more of these programme funds are spent at the district level than at the village level. Half of the Assam women we met sent their daughters to school. Here again, very few read newspapers, or listen to the radio.

Of the tribal women in Bastar, only 8 of the 300 women we met were literate. They had no contact with newspapers, radio or television. They were aware of TRYSEM and IRDP, because they were involved in these programmes. "Our 'Mukhia' brings important news to the men. They pass it to our sons, who tell us," some women told us.

Of the 135 sidi workers, we met in the Jabalpur district 9 were literate. They also had no contact with media. Though they were not aware of Labour laws or of government loans, they were aware of their exploitation.

In Himachal Pradesh, almost half the women we met and questioned told us they were simple literates. Another 20% were educated up to 5th standard. Almost all of them send their daughters to school. They were all aware of IRDP and TRYSEM and ready to take training. There is no local daily newspaper. The one local monthly does not have a women's page. There is one weekly radio programme for women, but their TV is only relay. They wanted local programmes. Half of the women said they had no time for TV and radio, but 25% of them said they liked reading the stories in the Hindi paper. They were not aware of their legal rights, but almost a quarter of the women we met said they were interested in politics, elections and news.

In one meeting near Cochin, where 60% of the women were illiterate, they told us that they do send their daughters to school. In another meeting they complained the education is very costly, they

have to pay Rs. 30 per child per month. While bidi workers working in group, we saw one of them loudly reading out newspaper to them, her wage being paid by the group.

Of the bidi workers whom we met in Maharashtra, all were illiterate. They told us that they were not aware of minimum wages or any of the Acts. In Ahmednagar, they complained of corrupt bidi officials. In Jamkhed where a women's organization is functioning effectively they had much greater awareness gained through their weekly meeting. Here they share their experiences, discuss problems and social issues, organize demonstrations, and distribute posters. In other places we met women who were aware of IRDP and TRYSEM, wanted training under TRYSEM for better agriculture and veterinary services and some wanted training to be Balwadi teachers. In Dharavi slum in Bombay, more than half of the women who attended our meetings were literate. 12% read newspapers, 18% saw TV — preferring programmes on workers, women, and serial films. They mostly receive important information through their neighbours and husbands. These women were aware of both bank loans and unions.

We also met women in the Bangalore slum. Half of them were literate, and half sent their daughters to school. Rural women in Karnataka also showed 50% literacy rates in our meetings but none of them had contact with any media. Their neighbours bring them the news. Some were aware of IRDP, but none knew about TRYSEM.

In the large Patna meeting, most of the women we met were illiterate. In rural areas in Bihar, most of those we met had never received any education.

However, they emphatically expressed their need to us for training in veterinary services, cattle care and cooperatives. The Women's Dairy Cooperative of Patna Distt. wanted a Mahila Bank.

In Tamil Nadu, the majority of the women at our meetings were literate, and half read newspapers. They said they like to read politics, and current events — like news on the Sri Lankan situation or on Sati. All of them were aware of the current sati issues. They complained that many things women think or want are not documented in the mass media. In the Madras meeting, these women were contract labourers, were aware of exploitative labour practices and existing labour legislation, because they were unionised. All of them wanted to take training to upgrade their skills in building construction.

Amongst the nine workers, in West Bengal, all of them were literate and all were members of a union, though they knew noth-

ing about union activities. Their union subscription fee is deducted directly from their wages. Amongst the 72 forest workers we met in West Bengal, only 3 were literate, and all sent their children to school. Only 8 of them knew about IRDP, and none had even seen TV. In one meeting, a potter's wife said she "would never sit at the potter's wheel, because it is improper for women to do so". All the other women present there, agreed with her view.

In Orissa many of the women had radios, and liked songs and plays, but not the news. They especially liked radio plays in Oriya. There was a Mahila Mandal in one of the villages where we met, but of the 160 women at that meeting, none were members, 10 of these women were literate and few of them were aware of the IRDP.

In our rural visits in the Punjab, very few of women we met were literate. About 10% said they listen to the radio but only a couple actually reads news. Nonetheless they all said they were interested in news and economic information. They were aware of politics, and of the migrant labour in the State and its effects on their job opportunities. Most of their sons are educated. Sixteen per cent had received some TRYSEM training, and most of them were aware of IRDP.

In Gujarat, less than half of the women we met were literate. Yet all of them listened to the radio. They liked women's programmes and information on starting small businesses. Almost half of them saw TV and liked all the programmes, except the local ones.

Amongst the 35 stone crushers, we met in Banda highway, none were literate, only 2 listened to the radio — to songs. They did not understand the news or discussion programmes. None of them vote as they are not on the voter's list. Their daughters help in their work, from very young ages. At Garam Pani, none of the women we met were aware of TRYSEM or any other development schemes.

In Andhra Pradesh, a little more than half of the women who attended our meeting were illiterate. The vendors present told us they came to know of important news from their customers — "Important news flow in the air in the market." 15% listen to radios, but only a few see TV. Half of the women send their daughters to school — 20% of them go the school in their own village, and 30% go out to a neighbouring village for school.

In one meeting of 100 women in Kashmir while only 25 said they know how to read and write, all 100 said they read (read to by someone) the *Srinagar Times* in Urdu. In Kashmir, Achbal meeting, all of the women present listen to the radio — to news, politics, and other matters. Most of them also to news on Radio Pakistan.

11 of them were aware of IRDP and TRYSEM. While only 11 of their girls go to school. 150 of their boys attend. They said there is a conflict between statements on radio and TV, they think that TV was the more reliable source.

CONTRIBUTION TO FAMILY INCOME

During our public hearing, we frequently heard women saying, "There is no one else in my family who is earning." Thus we made it our practice to ask women in each meeting to raise their hands if they were the sole supporters of their families. We know, the responses received in such meeting are annexed, they are subjective number's and cannot be generalised, they reveal a great deal about these women's economic status, and are worth reporting here.

The answer to this question of who was a 'sole supporter' was drawn very carefully, and as the tour went on, we began to realize the significance of the answer. We observed that the poorer the family, the higher the incidence of women being the sole supporters. According to our information we found in the South, women sole supporters were comparatively greater in number. These women reported that their men were unemployed, ill, depressed alcoholic, working outside and not sending money to them, or simply not contributing any income. Those without men told stories of abandonment, widowhood, or being mothers without being married.

We tried to gather information about the number of women contributing 50% or more of their family's income, but it was too complicated concept to convey.

It has been amazing that women, even in the most critical time of drought or crop failure, did find small ways to earn income. They are constantly gathering dung or wood for fuel, stitching, clothing and bedding, taking on domestic work in other households, stringing cots, fetching water, etc. to earn what they need, while men are earning only when they have a 'proper' job.

REPRESENTATION

At every stop on our tour, we tried to discover at what levels women were represented in the society. We tried to meet women in the village Panchayats, but mostly they did not exist. In the village level cooperatives of artisans, weavers, dairy producers, and fishers, women were also mostly absent. Either they were not included in the membership, or they were listed simply for the name-sake — the named women did not even know they were members. Where women were members, they hardly ever participated

in general body meetings. The common answer from the officials of cooperatives was, "There is no bar on their attendance, they just are not interested". i.e., there has been active extension by these societies to absorb women into their active folds.

Where women were found in cooperative was where there were separate women's societies — in dairy, bidi work and credit co-ops. They all faced problems, and only a few were economically successful, but these women were gaining experience to help them deal with obstacles and articulate their difficulties.

Women members in trade unions are still a rare event in a few location, exceptional cases of unions of bonded labours, bidi workers, construction workers, and domestic workers are found. In the separate women's unions, we found active women cadre. In mixed unions, except for one or two educated women leaders, a women's cadre was missing.

Mahila Mandals, Mahila Samitis, Mother's Club, Mahila Sangams, and Stri Sangathans have been widely spread through the states, and women work at every level of these organizations.

These groups have been instrumental in affecting local change. In Nagaland, the Mother's Clubs have mobilized to stop liquor vending and drug smuggling. In one area, they successfully lowered the number of liquor stalls from 180 to 30. They have also organized against the military abuse to their families during the insurgencies in their area. Himachal Pradesh Mahila Mandals are also actively addressing issues of alcoholism in their communities. They also take up cases of family quarrels for conciliation.

Manipur women are traditionally effective organizers in their communities. The current living example is their resistance to a modern super market being constructed in place of the city's 100 year old women's market. These women still do not have any seats in the District Autonomous Council, but they have articulated their demand to get the power of selecting women beneficiaries for IRDP loan into the hands of their Mahila Mandals.

Assam's Mahila Samitis, based on economic activities of weaving and agriculture, have become inspiring examples to such groups in other parts of the country. They still have not successfully integrated other development programmes into their framework, however.

Madhya Pradesh has recently seen the emergence of 108 new Mahila Mandals. They all have buildings of their own, with government support. Though the grant is small, they are welcoming these

centres.

In Maharashtra Mahila Mandals practice a progressive approach, trying to keep poor women and equality as their focal points. Their activities range from bhajans to morchas.

In Punjab's Mahila Mandals, women focus on income generating activities and village security during times of unrest. They made articulate demands to us about their needs for more funds, training, building and dairy cooperatives — a positive measure to bring women into cooperative activity.

In the Kutch area, Mahila Mandals run tailoring programmes and then supply workers to Free Trade Zone industries, at Kandla. While helping many women secure employment, they have not taken up their women workers' issues of extremely low wages in FIZ employment. However, we met active leaders of village women's dairy cooperatives, in other districts.

Through Mahila Mandals in the Garhwal area of U.P. women have organized against mines which are causing land slides in catchment areas. This "Kheerakhot" movement has generated favourable response from the surrounding communities.

Rajasthan has the largest government programme of any state for developing women's awareness. We visited the Women's Development Projects operating in Udipur and Jodhpur districts, at their meetings called 'Jajam'. The local leader is the 'Sathin'. She gets support from the 'Pracheta' who supervise 10 villages. She in turn is under a Project Director and the Collector. Women working in agriculture, forest produce gathering, animal husbandry, and road construction gathered and spoke in a free, confident manner about their occupations and social problems. The State Government maintains a very low profit, even when women from this project openly protest against government irregularities, or lack of minimum wages, food coupons, or Famine Relief Worksites.

HEALTH ISSUES

Women workers recognize how important an asset their health is to all aspects of their lives. Despite this recognition, however, a woman's concern for her children's health and well being often eclipses any thoughts about her own condition. When the whole family is surviving on her daily income of Rs. 4, she cannot afford to take even one day off when she becomes pregnant or falls ill. We encountered sad illustrations of the toll this kind of economic necessity takes on women's health when 28 of the 30 mothers who gather

forest produce in Kherwada told us they had lost at least one of their infant children. Bidi worker-mothers in Sihora, M.P. told a similar tale — 53 of the 60 women we met had lost babies.

Many kinds of restrictions limit women's access to timely medical treatment. Time is a major limitation. If the health facility is very far, or a woman cannot leave her work without suffering a cut in wages, or if she simply cannot leave her children or take them with her, she will forgo the visit.

Another restriction is the kind of treatment a women receives once she does seek help. In Nagaland and Manipur both, women complained that even at government medical dispensaries they were being charged high prices — even for injections. "The doctors are not available, and we have to pay for everything." In Mahdya Pradesh the chilli pounders from Jabalpur complained that the government only comes to them for family planning — 'Nasbandhi' and even after that, there is complete lack of follow up. "When we really need them — like for our children who suffer constant fever, cold, and cough then we never see help." These women themselves suffer burning in their feet and palms, respiratory problems, and general uneasiness.

In a meeting in Raipur district we happily found that 135 of the 200 women at our meeting had their infants immunized. The health leader of the Mahila Mandal was instrumental in raising this community's health consciousness and follow up care. Once when they went together to a Family Planning Camp, they refused treatment because the doctor was not using clean sheets — as they had been trained was proper.

The health problems of Maharashtrian women varied according to their occupations. Hamal headloaders of Pune experience incessant pains in the leg, back and head. They simply feel like lying down all the time. Cement bag stitcher suffers body, finger and eye pain from the constant exposure to cement bag dust and the heavy stitching work. They said very shyly and apologetically, "Maybe a creche could at least save our children from this constant exposure." Women have never demanded creche as by way of their right. They continue to do this work whether they are sick or well.

Bombay slum women suffer numerous health problems and visit the hospital frequently. They complained of the time they took from their work. Of 200 women in the meeting, 20 had suffered serious health problems related to their occupation, which now hinders their ability to continue work.

Himachal Pradesh women were more articulate in making

specific health complaints. 250 of them counted their daily hours of work and reported 12 or more. Their common complaints were of fever, arthritis, stomach and body aches. Knitters suffer asthma, stitching causes eye strain and backache, stone cutting caused back problems. In the public health centres, medicines are not available, and the prescriptions made by doctors are always too costly. Some women told us, the hospitals are very far, and many of us die on the road trying to reach there for treatment.

In Bihar, 70% of village women we met reported that they give birth to their children at home with the help of dai. Punjab women also told us that the "dai is better" than hospital births. Rural Rajasthan women said they only go to a hospital for delivering their babies if there is a serious complication.

Tamil Nadu village women also practise child birth at home. They use the services of an ANM and neighbours. Their common problems with T.B. could not be helped at home though. They, along with Madras women, demanded both better services in the hospital, and a creche service for their children in the hospital.

Orissa fisherwomen suffer severe skin infections on their feet because of working constantly in water full of fertilizers. "Blinding headaches" also plague them, from endless hours in the sun. Punjab and Madhya Pradesh agricultural labourers suffer giddiness and infections from their high exposure to chemical fertilizers. Ropemakers in Tamil Nadu and Kerala suffer deep cuts across their palm and fingers, which they treat with warmed coconut oil at night. Cashew shellers suffer eczema from the oil the nut exudes.

Calcutta prostitutes suffer venereal disease, gastric troubles, appetite loss and fatigue. Cheap liquor takes a great toll of their health.

Papad rollers in Gujarat suffer burns in palms and wrist pain. Sulphur loaders' fertility at Kandla Port has been affected. Groundnut shellers of Jamuna Nagar have open mouth sores, and cottonpod shellers of Wadhwan suffer finger infections and irregular menstrual cycles. Lacemakers of Narsapur, A.P., and spinners everywhere suffer eyestrain and headache due to the fineness of their work.

In Banda district, U.P. almost all women and children have night blindness. They eat mainly wheat for every meal of the day hardly ever vegetables. Fruits and milk are simply unheard of. None of the children are immunized.

Gujjars, the migrant shepherds of J & K, suffer premature birth

and deaths due to their long days of walking. They also suffer anemia, worms, skin infections, arthritis and goitre. Carpet weavers suffer joint pain, embroiderers, eyestrain. The head of a government hospital in J & K suggested that ANMS were unnecessary because they are not fully trained like nurses, nor do they have experience or the social acceptance of a traditional dai. She suggested concentrating on the dais.

ALCOHOL CRISIS

"This man of mine
returns home drunk.
Sathin, he beats me every day,
I toil the whole day,
Sathin, I cannot bear the beating."

This was the song a WDP group of Rajasthani rural women in Pai village sang to us in their traditional note when we went to visit them. They were demanding that liquor distillation be banned in their area. Unfortunately, this song could gain consensus in most areas of India. It is a lament we heard from many women entrenched in the poverty that alcoholism brings upon countless families.

Women in Solan, Himachal Pradesh, put it this way: "When we ask the government for schools, it takes 10 years, but the liquor shops appear instantaneously — without even asking. In fact, they appear despite our vocal protests!" They were very agitated about the government's policy to open liquor vending shops for revenue. The Mahila Mandals' policy demand is that no liquor vending shops should be opened in any area without the Resolution of a 2/3 majority of the village people to do so.

Simla women echoed their disgust. "If the government was really interested in our welfare, they would not open these 'thekkas'. While the government's income is increasing, we become poorer day by day," one woman said. Another added, "If sugar, kerosene, foodgrains and other things of necessity are under ration, why is liquor sale unlimited?" Liquor and poverty were a clearly linked equation for these women.

And though tribals in Orissa have licences which permit them to distill only a certain quantity of liquor for home consumption and festival times, it is not adhered to. Temperance is difficult to maintain because alcoholism is high amongst them. "Development work proceeds slowly, if at all, in these areas, because of the negative ef-

fects of liquor on people's motivation," one voluntary agency worker told us. There is a belief amongst the men that they cannot work hard without drinking.

When we asked some fishermen why they drank so much, they replied, "We work in water, on the sea, it is cold. To keep warm, we have to drink hard."

The voluntary worker asked, "How come women work harder than you, and still survive — without drinking?"

The response was, "They are women after all." Domestic workers in the Hyderabad slums said that many of them are either deserted or widowed due to alcoholism amongst their men. Their priority was the total prohibition of liquor in the town. Women sweepers in Jammu also reported one of their major problems as alcoholism amongst the men of their community. One sweeper said, "They drink, but it has such bad effects on us. Our hard earned income is snatched to support this habit."

A nurse in Pune reported how bad these effects can be. She said, "We used to see women widowed or deserted due to their men drinking. But more and more we see suicide attempts by women who cannot tolerate the strain this problem puts on their lives either the poverty, or the beating, or just the everyday abuse."

Women in Kachipuram told us, "Here in our village, there are no liquor shops, but you will find all the men in our community drinking, you understand?"

Uttarkhand Kausani women said, quite frustrated, "We could not solve problem even after organizing. We had solved problem to a great extent, but the government did not back us in follow up, so the problem slowly seeped back in."

Women in the Punjab told us that "90% of our men drink as if they have to drink. The young drink more than the old. The son drinks more than the father and ruins his youth. Every village has at least one shop that drains our earnings."

Bombay slum women's solution to that problem was that 'the drunkard's salary should go directly to his wife, and not given in his own hands.'

In Assam the effects even filter down to hinder girls' education. Drinking is a serious problem on the plantations, so mothers have stopped sending their girls outside to school because they meet harassment coming home in the dark.

"In my village there must be 360 households of Rajputs, but I

am the only one working as a Sathin like this." Ghisibai, Sathin of WDP at Pai village, Rajasthan told us, "I am the only woman dealing with men and women like this, and they have realized that "I am not a shy type."

"Let me tell you an example of what happened to me in this job. I was passing through the village street one day with tea in one hand and snacks on a plate in the other hand. I passed some seated men, who stopped me. One offered, 'Pass those things to me — I will hold them while you draw your ghunghat. I said, 'Listen brother, you need not to advise me, if I draw ghunghat and then abuse you people, is this good? Or if I do not draw ghunghat, and treat people with respect, is this bad? It is no longer necessary that I always draw it, or that I never draw it. And I walked on, still carrying my things."

Despite Manipur women's hard work, their notable contribution to Manipur economy, and their usual self-reliance, they felt insecure due to the polygamy custom many of their husbands practise. He often brings another woman to the family, and usually at a later stage of married life. She feels like she works and rears the children, while he enjoys with the other wife. One for work, one for enjoyment. This custom is prevalent right up to men holding the highest offices in the State. And it is increasing with the increase in black money. But most Manipur women are too proud to even mention this problem to others.

Amongst Assam women there is no dowry, no purdah, and women hold traditional rights to land, though the land right is declining in practice.

In Himachal Pradesh there is also no dowry and no purdah practices. The incidence of women's desertion is high in Bilaspur, Sirmour, and Solan districts as reported to us by women lawyers. Parents delay sending their earning daughters to her inlaws, and the man subsequently deserts her. Her parents then claim, and often receive, 'reet' — bride money or maintenance.

Dowry is a major problem in Kerala. Fish vendors (quite poor) reported having to pay Rs. 15,000-25,000 for their daughters' dowries.

Girls being sacrificed in lieu of some blessing from God (usually for a son) are left abandoned as devadasis in some districts of both Maharashtra and Karnataka. The root cause is poverty. Families cannot maintain their daughters, so they are thrown out to fend for themselves — with God's sanctification.

In UP, MP, Bihar and Gujarat, Muslim women in purdah work

at bidi rolling, garment stitching, chikan work, Zariwork, weaving and lace making, and the like. Because of purdah, they cannot go to the employers to collect and deliver their goods. They are thus quite vulnerable to middlemen, or they are forced to send their children. Then they suffer because I.D. cards are not issued in their own names. Some women, though, are now defying purdah. Saira of Lucknow moves freely in the streets in her tricycle made especially for her handicap. She said to us, "Though my mother keeps burkha, I never will!" Famidabi, a bidi worker from Bhopal, while travelling to Delhi to speak on behalf of her bidi working sisters; abandoned burkha at the taunts of her followers, "Will you bring revolution having your burkha on?" Though her son did not approve, her husband did not mind!

In women's dairy cooperative in Bihar, upper caste women sent their men or a servant to deliver milk to the cooperative, as they were in purdah. Now, though, this gradually changing as these women move out to take training in Patna, Madras, and Anand.

In the Calcutta meeting of voluntary agencies, we received many complaints of the high cost of a daughter's wedding in West Bengal.

Purdah also exists in Punjab, DWACRA women there took 2 years to overcome their purdah constraint.

WOMENS' PRIORITIES

Women in Rajasthan asked for marketing organisations, fair prices for the forest produce, water (especially rains), loans, better wages, regular work, and "More famine relief work."

Women in Manipur demanded a halt to army harassment, a solution for the drug abuse amongst their children, health services, better loans for working capital, a credit facility and regular work.

Nagaland women wanted to learn to dye wool, better marketing opportunities, shed for vendors, removal of new liquor shops and drug smuggling, and health services.

Assamese women wanted a booklet about their rights as workers, to be published in Assamese. They want Mahila Samitis to have more activities. They want some permanent measures against floods, access to loans, training in veterinary science, and like everywhere — "Regular work."

Women in Madhya Pradesh demanded "Stop rejections and deductions in bidis." "Give us fair price for forest produce." "We need more rice and cloth at cheaper rates," "a recovering mortgage

law", and "more women in the mines." "We need more water on our own land so we will not have to migrate to Jammu." Women of Jhabua demanded fair price of the collected Tendu leaves.

Himachal Pradesh women want irrigation systems, schools of every level in each village, food processing and veterinary training, and banning of alcohol shops in their villages.

Kerala women's needs are transport for fish vendors, loan, and banning of mechanized trawlers.

Women in Maharashtra articulated many demands to us. They want regular work, fair wages, alternative work in factories, creches, potable water, fodder, places in the market, workspace in the slums, licences, I.D. cards, banning of mechanization in tobacco factories, and a Board for Domestic Workers.

Karnataka women voiced their needs for an accommodation in-village for female functionaries and extension workers.

Bihar women want fair wages for spinners, "more income", cheap foodgrains, mahila banks, and a balwadi in every village.

Priorities for Tamilnadu women included credit, housing, worksheds, jobs for their sons, regular work, and better market links for weavers. They demanded old-age and widow pension payments at a higher rate and regularly, overtime wages for domestic workers, no more eviction from slums, creche facilities, and a Board for construction workers.

In West Bengal, women mine workers asked for lighter work. They also demanded pensions, loans, and a halt to mechanisation in the mines.

Women in Orissa wanted safety equipment provided to them in the mines, and medical facilities.

Women in Punjab wanted the government to run a production centre and to lend help in marketing. They pressed for implementation of minimum wages. They asked for fish ponds to be given to women for farming; and they want electricity.

In Gujarat women want alternative work for those displaced from mining. Their other demands include higher wages, regular salary, liceness, water, cheap access to raw materials, and regular electricity.

The processing needs of Uttar Pradesh women were for cheap essential commodities, potable water, medical facilities, and fodder.

Licences, credit, 'a dignified life' and fodder were the major priorities of Andhra Pradesh women.

Jammu and Kashmir women had the basic priorities of more work, more income, and a reliable fuel supply other than wood.

"Why not plan to bring water from the sky,

Why not plan to hold water in our land?

For the sake of work we travel to distant lands,

Let us plan ourselves,

Let us plan ourselves..."

(WDP women of Pai villages)

VOLUNTARY ORGANIZATIONS

We met local voluntary organizations in most of the states we travelled. Many of them are taking up the most difficult and remarkable task of organising the exploited, unorganized women workers. The common goal shared by these various organizations is to improve the quality of life of these workers. Depending on local needs and the organization's leadership, there is a wide range of approaches and structures each group employs to achieve its goals.

Some organizations take up womens' rights issues. They make demands for womens' access to assets, or to minimum wages, or to the rights that existing legislation is supposed to grant them. Other organizations concentrate more on a welfare approach, providing services which are not available from governmental agencies. Some groups work to implement government anti-poverty programmes, or provide training and income-generating activities. Others combine some or all of these approaches.

All the voluntary organizations when countered were very supportive of the Commission's work. They helped in our data collection by filling out questionnaires on behalf of their women members. Whenever a Commission meeting was organized, these organizations came and brought women workers to meet us. We consistently observed that women involved in organizations like these had much greater awareness of their legal rights and ways to acquire them, than unorganised women ever did. Many of the women associated with voluntary organizations presented memorandums to the Commission, putting forth their demands.

In separate meeting with the organizers themselves, they shared their expert knowledge with us about the problems, priorities, and experiences of organising they had faced with these women. The recommendations which emerged from their experiences have been incorporated into this report.

COMMISSION'S TOUR METHODOLOGY

To get a better understanding of women from the unorganised sector in the country, the Commission decided to visit as many states as possible where they would have had public hearings and meet women at their workplaces. In February 1987 the Commission faced the difficult task of organising tours to meet unorganised women.

The Commission began by making their appeal in regional languages through newspapers, radio and TV.

This appeal was made in February and March while the Commission substantially wrote a general letter to the Chief Secretary of each State, and contacted voluntary organizations and researchers.

Good response from all fronts began to shape the Commission's tour plan. They planned a 7-month tour of 17 states, beginning with the mountain areas and the North-East first, to avoid the monsoons. Due to the shortage of time, the Commission opted to visit those economic activities specific to each area they visited. They arranged to meet not only individual women called to public hearing, but also planned to visit voluntary organizations, institutions, actual work places and government officials.

A week before the Commission's arrival in a certain State, each State Government announced their visit again on television, radio, and in the news to help attract women to the public hearings.

When the Commission was received in each State, they were clear and firm about refusing all ceremonies and formalities and dismissing any security guards or escorts which had been arranged for them. They proceeded right to the public hearings which had been arranged. Usually 100-200 women were present. Without any garlanding or welcome speeches, the Commission or one of the members of the Commission began the meeting by standing up and giving some background information about how the National Commission was set up. She emphasized in very simple words that the Government had begun to realize that without women's participation, no country can progress. They understood the need for improving women's lives, since women contribute so much to the national and family economy. The Government of India had therefore sent the Commission to study the existing conditions of women workers in the unorganised sector.

The Chairperson said the Commission had come to seek out their views, opinions, thoughts, feelings and problems. She encouraged the women to tell the Commission the difficulties they

encounter in their work at their lives, their priorities and suggestions, or whatever they felt like discussing.

After this, the Commission introduced themselves as individuals. It was explained that they are not politicians or government officials and that they were not out to seek votes. They gave these introductions of themselves: "one Commission member is a journalist hails from Garwhal; one is a Professor and Director of Social work from Bombay; one is the Planning Commission Adviser hails from Tamil Nadu; one is from Bengal where she is doing research on women's conditions; and the last is from Gujarat where she does social work with women like these. One other member who is not present is a social worker in South India."

Then the Commission introduced the Member Secretary, a senior level IAS Officer from Haryana whom the GOI deputed to facilitate the National Commission's work. At this point the Commission emphasized that they were not going to give the women anything — no grants, subsidies, loans, anything — and urged them not to form expectations. Instead, they said, we are here to convey your ideas and problems to those who can work on solving them. Our mission is strictly fact finding.

Then the Commission began to explain the presence of the video camera. They pointed to the Recorder and said she will faithfully write down everything that you say today. Your ideas will be reported to the GOI and the outside world. To avoid any mistake in understanding or interpreting, the Commission also wants to give this video report to the GOI, so they can hear these straight from your mouth, face to face, in your own voice. The Commission urged the women not to be afraid of the camera — it was not T.V., it would not come on T.V., none of their 'sahibs' or 'seths' would see it.

With those details, introduction on the side of the Commission finished, they asked the women for their introduction by way of certain common questions, to which the women raised their hands.

- * How many of you have land?
- * How many of you are engaged in raising cattle?
- * How many of you work on some craft in your home?
- * How many of you go to vend or hawk something in the markets or the streets?
- * How many go out to do labour of any kind?
- * How many have no other earning member in your family besides you? Why? Where are your men?

(From this question women began to talk).

- * How many of you have lost children before they reached 5 years of age?
- * How many of you have your own bank account?
- * How many have taken IRDP, TRYSEM, or other loans?
- * How many of you are ready to receive training? What kind of training would you like?
- * How far is water from your home?
- * How far is fuel?
- * How far is the hospital?
- * How many have joined Mahila Mandals or Cooperatives?
- * How many read newspapers or hear radio or T.V.?
- * How do you get news?
- * Do you deliver your children in hospitals or with a dai?
- * How many of you know about these laws:

Minimum Wage Act

Equal Remuneration Act

IRDPLoans.

- * Who is the 'Sarkar' for you? What has been your experience with them?
- * What are your priorities?

These questions, more or less in this order, prepared the atmosphere for the women to talk about themselves. They talked individually about their work — the mechanics of the jobs, their incomes, ways they are exploited, their experiences with government officials and police, with banks, with forest guards, with cooperatives, about how they obtain raw materials, or loans, or if they get any healthcare. They talked about alcoholism in their needs, priorities, and suggestions. Some talked at length, articulately — some with anger, and some with tears.

Despite the Commission's introduction, women's expectations were raised that they would receive immediate help. In the cases of some urgent feasible solutions, e.g., pension cases pending, or guidance for legal aid the Commission contacted the concerned officer there and then. Otherwise they had to leave the women with their unfulfilled expectations.

The Commission had a mixed experience in finding good

translators during their tours. Whenever possible, they preferred to engage a research scholar from the State. State Government officers also helped willingly. There was often a tendency for the translator to condense and edit with an unconscious bias. A few were negative, so that the Commission had to dismiss them. A lady social welfare officer in Kashmir and one in Madhya Pradesh were the ideal translators.

The meetings took place in Circuit Houses, school compounds, Panchayat buildings, along roadsides, under a tree, at various workplaces, in homes, hostels, institutes, town halls, at farms, mines, plantations, coop or union offices, Mahila Samiti buildings, and in factories. In every state the Commission also met the voluntary organizations who are dealing either actively and/or through research with workers of the unorganized sector. To these meetings the Commission also invited those who had shown interest in the Commission's work by responding to the public appeal.

The Voluntary Organizations were specifically asked to responding on these points:-

- 1. What were their own observations about the condition and problems of poor women and their work?
- 2. What were their experiences in organizing these women?
- 3. What did they know about the delivery of the various programmes/schemes for these women?
- 4. What were the problems of the Voluntary Organizations themselves?
- 5. What were their suggestions regarding the programmes and policies of the Government?

The Voluntary Organizations gave active response to the Commission's queries. Besides the public hearings, the informal meetings with women in their workplaces, and sessions with voluntary organizations in each State, the Commission also met with the Secretaries of Rural Development, Labour, Home and Child Welfare, Cooperatives, Cottage Industries, Health, Corporations of Handloom, Handicraft, Women's Development, and Sericulture. They were usually headed by the Chief Secretary or the Minister concerned. The Commission conveyed their tour observations to the officers during these meetings, gave suggestions, and checked some information with them to get their understanding of the problems. Despite the Commission's extensive planning, their numerous letters to each State, and their clear objectives, they fell

into the same trap over and over again. When they arrived in several States, government officials thought they were the "Commission for the unemployed" or "Commission of Women's Welfare" or for "Social Welfare".

They could not grasp the Commission's objectives to study working women in the unorganized sector, and again and again they turned the Commission over to the Social Welfare Department, which had arranged for them to visit orphanages, destitute homes, and social welfare training programmes. Then the Commission would have to cancel this programme and begin from scratch. In so many places, the government's concept of women as workers was completely lacking.

Out of all these meetings, a detailed tour diary was kept as well as 50 hours of video recordings. From this material the Commission's tour report has been edited for this chapter.

